

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



SHOULD YOU EVEN BOTHER
Worrying About Church Growth?

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You have a lot going on at your church. In an average week, a typical pastor spends time on message prep, counseling, training, attending leadership meetings, and dealing with the administrative hassles that occur when running the “small business” aspects of a church. **Just being on the treadmill of keeping the church running every week consumes a vast majority of a pastor’s time.**

Being a part of a church is an all-consuming endeavor that requires more effort and energy than we would have ever believed when we were in seminary.

Considering those circumstances, do you ever have time during your day to think about church growth?

In some ways, the term “church growth” feels like something from the 1980s. When I think of church growth, I conjure up images of VHS tapes in clamshell cases, wire-bound binders full of fill-in-the-blank forms, and lots of charts demonstrating various factors that drive church effectiveness.

I wonder if the idea of church growth has fallen out of the common vernacular of our leadership simply because some of those ideas seem outdated and disconnected from a pastor’s everyday life. I know that thinking through the future of your church and whether it is as effective as it could be isn’t always on the top of most leaders’ to-do lists. Getting this weekend’s message together or dealing with a conflict with the youth pastor typically ranks higher in the list for most leaders than asking what we’re doing to

see greater attendance this weekend, let alone later this year. However, there is nothing more important for us to consider today.

Over the last ten years, I’ve had the chance to walk with two leadership teams as their churches died. The amazing part of those stories is that our church had the privilege of participating in the rebirth of those ministries as a campus of our church. **However, walking through that process with those leaders was incredibly humbling.** Seeing them realize that their ministries had come to an end motivates me to think about how our churches should be reaching more people than ever before to keep our ministries healthy and alive.

I still remember how one of those church leaders leaned way back in his chair, reflected on the past, and declared that **he always thought that if his church just kept doing what they had always done, then they would just keep reaching people.** They had ridden that train for twenty years, and the church had gone from above 400 in attendance to down below 30.

When another leader realized that things were coming to a close at her church, **she asked with some desperation in her voice if I thought there would ever be a time when kids would return to the church.** You see, it had been decades since anyone had brought a young person to that church because, frankly, that ministry had left its effectiveness back in the 1960s.

Reflecting on their experience humbles me and leads me to consider my own; **it makes me realize that we are only one generation away from complete extinction. With that in mind, we all need to worry about church growth.** If we're not wrestling with and thinking through how to reach more people, then we begin on a slippery slope towards ineffectiveness, which will eventually lead to decline, decay, and death.

When you examine the attendance patterns of these churches that died, you'll find that there was a time when they thrived. **In fact, you can find pictures of full Christmas Eve services besides photographs of Sunday School classes filled with children, and it was at that moment that the church leaders took their feet off the gas and didn't think about how they were going to continue to reach people.** Looking at the interior life of a dying church reveals a humbling reality along with the fact that churches can become frozen and stuck in the midst of their most effective moments.

For me, when my ministry feels like it's at its most effective point, then that's when I need to wrestle with the question, **"What are we doing to change, to grow, and to reach the next generation?"** **If our church is at its most effective, then that's the time we're in the most danger of atrophying and becoming stuck in our ways.**



Church growth is simply an outcome of evangelism and discipleship. **We all know that the New Testament is clear that our churches need to constantly be proclaiming the message of Christ, demonstrating His life and love to the people around us, and seeing His followers mature into active, thriving, growing relationships with Him.** Growing churches can't take an exclusively all-evangelism or all-discipleship approach; they need a harmonious blend of both and should design those practices with the intention of reaching new people in the community.

If we aren't consistently leaning into what it takes to grow, there can be a slow decline and ultimately a decay that can lead to an end to our churches. The culture around this continues to shift. However, it's a waste of time for us to bemoan the fact that our culture is changing. **The reality is that God has placed us in our leadership roles in a time experiencing an incredible cultural change.** What a great privilege that you and I have been given! The fact that we live in an ever-changing culture should lead us to be thinking about how we're changing as well.

At the most basic level, churches begin to grow when they encourage people to attend regularly and to invite their friends; however, this has become a challenge in modern communities that are more transient than ever before. However, rather than telling people to settle down and stop moving around, our churches must live with that reality and figure out how we can leverage that movement. **One of the beautiful things about a transient society is that it has driven models like multi-site and church online into new ways of thinking about what constitutes a community.**

There was a time when the church was simply a local parish, and you never thought about reaching people outside of your zip code. Those realities are gone. Mobility has affected our culture, but there are many other ways that our culture has changed and impacted the church. How can we view those changes as opportunities to reach more people for Christ? **Which leaders within your church are charged with asking what you can do to see more people come to your church next weekend?** That's not a facetious question. Who wonders what we can do to craft next year's Christmas experience to be even better than last year's? Which community elder leaders are considering the dynamics of attraction that are driving people to invite their friends? **Church growth is led by leaders.** Our job is to train and equip our people to become the kind of folks that engage their community. That starts with church leaders like you consistently asking those church growth questions.



As we head into this new year, **I challenge you to carve out a portion of your weekly schedule to wrestle through questions about church growth.** I really do think that an investment in this area will stave off the potential negative effects of decline that could be developing in your church even now without you knowing. Should your church even worry about church growth? Yes, of course it should, and that starts with you thinking about it.

That process starts with you and I:

- focusing our time, effort, and energy.
- spending more time in prayer about growth.
- studying Scriptures and asking God to guide us.
- seeking resources.
- studying what's happening in other growing churches.
- asking questions of friends.
- evaluating what we're doing to drive growth.

All these functions and more are a part of our roles as leaders who are looking to make an impact in our communities.

WONDERING WHERE TO START WHEN IT COMES TO GROWTH AT YOUR CHURCH?

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