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CHARACTERISTICS
OF GROWING CHURCH
PLANTS

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TWENTY-FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GROWING NEW CHURCH

(CUT THIS IN PRESENTATION FORMAT) This paper has looked at seven barriers that churches will face if they continue to grow. It has presented and discussed twelve innovative strategies being used today to continue on a growth plan and avoid plateauing. At the beginning of this paper I asked the question, "Should a church grow to please God?" After presenting techniques to overcome a dying or plateauing church; after developing and discussing twelve strategies being used across the United States, it is clear that I believe every minister has been called to lead more people than he is touching with the gospel currently! Growing a church is not a pleasing God issue. Any pastor can please the Lord God completely if he only obeys Him! Therefore, growing a church must simply be a way that a minister or group of staff ministers to seek to fulfill God's call to evangelize the world through their own lives. Church growth is more a matter of heart first and then having a certain amount of techniques to assist you along the way. This paper has offered the techniques, only a man of God serving his local congregation can provide the heart.

The real purpose of church growth is to change the size of heaven. With this in mind it is easy to see that many congregations plan too small. As we face the turn of the century, congregations need to plan bigger so God will have to get involved. Still churches try to do what man can easily accomplish instead of letting God lead in the supernatural! As men called of God, pastors must act as a catalyst. Someone must lead God's people to get a vision of growth and get stirred up for God. Understandably, this vision must come from God. As a leader one must get alone with our heavenly father and desperately seek what God would have His people do. This is where the burning conviction that leads your soul comes from. By seeking to change the size of heaven it then gives us a sense of destiny to our work.

It is good to talk about church growth. Churches should experience growth on a regular basis. For those who do not see continual growth, perhaps a look at a few symptoms of a diseased fellowship will help. By recognizing these symptoms it enables the numeric church to focus on eliminating these infections that are crippling the church. There are three symptoms of a diseased fellowship.

Prayerlessness

Many churches do not realize that prayer is more than an activity. It is an attitude, a way of life. The Bible's prescription in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 for a healthy spirit-life, and therefore a church-life, is to, "pray without ceasing." If the church will participate in a preventive health-care plan of prayer, spiritual wellness can be maintained. The book of Acts records examples of unity and power in the fellowship of believers that were accompanied by congregational prayer (c.f. 1:14; 4:24; 12:12). If a church desires to be healthy, constant prayer is essential.

Lack of Vision

It is God's will that every church grow. And in places where there are huge amounts of people, large churches can be grown. Church growth is hindered greatly when the people of the local church have no vision for ministry or growth. Growth is also hindered when there is no consensus or agreement about the vision of the church and when we have wrong dreams for the church. By identifying specific achievable goals and carrying them out, it helps to change defeated attitudes into positive ones.

The Splintered Fellowship

In the book of Acts the splendor of the Pentecost event is prefaced in the first verse of Acts 2, by the quality of fellowship among those believers. Togetherness is the ingredient that jumps to mind. That memorable event is contrasted with the equally memorable event in Acts 6:1. Here the fellowship had splintered because the Greek widows had been neglected in the ministry of church. There are six splintering attitudes that still confront the church today. They are:

Number One: Possessiveness

When the membership becomes possessive it can be quite debilitating for the church. Some of the most frequent ways members are possessive can be seen in how churches use classrooms, equipment, teachers, leadership, and finances. When a church is possessive it becomes ineffective. Remember, the church is the only institution that exists for those that are not already part of it!

Number Two: Power Struggles

That age old quest for dominance, can nullify the quality of servanthood that Jesus demanded was the key to greatness. In churches that experience this struggle for power, there is a lack of trust and fellowship.

Number Four: Dullness

When one looks at the church of the first century there was nothing dull about it! People were magnetically drawn to its excitement. Today, many things attribute to the development and spread of dullness in the church. Unpreparedness by the professional staff is part of it. Worship that is always the same is dull. Excitement is never taught; it is always caught!

Number Five: Nonrelevant Ministries

Creative ministries in touch with the community keep the church sharp relevant. Specific needs in one's community give the church the opportunity to be target, answering the questions people are asking and thus resolving the dilemmas they face. Relevant ministries are not limited to high financed programs but can be as simple as touching the life of a man in the hospital or as complicated as feeding 5,000 needy lives on Thanksgiving Day. A relevant ministry always is conditioned by the willingness of church leaders to be innovative. That

innovation sparks energy that draws people to the church because their life needs will be satisfied.

Number Six: Lazy Leadership

In any church the staff and volunteer leadership usually sets the pace for the congregation. Churches seldom are able to rise above the quality of the leaders they follow. Leadership that is not assertive hinders church growth. Like a rampant virus, laziness adversely affects church growth. There is no way around it, real church growth requires hard work.

Our heavenly Father knows of the impending dangers of our lives, which affects the growth of our churches. God's will is that every church experience growth. But churches must become virus free to be growth rich. Therefore it is crucial that we eliminate the viruses that disable growth possibilities.

George Gallup Jr. states as we approach the turn of the century there are five gaps in the religious conditions of Americans. These five gaps are:

- “The obvious gap in our vertical relationship with God.”
- The gap between humans which is the horizontal relationship.
- The ethics gap which is the difference between the way we think of ourselves and the way we actually are.
- The knowledge gap which is the gap between America's stated faith and their lack of the most basic knowledge about that faith.
- The gap between believers and belongers.

There are few who will dispute that the 1990's have been a period of severe testing for the churches of America. Part of the reason for this is that they have had to seek to relate to a populace that is increasingly drawn to spirituality, but less enthusiastic about organized religion, which they often find to be irrelevant, unfulfilling and boring. While the challenges are great, church leaders should not become discouraged about the prospects for broadening and deepening religion in America. There are hopeful ways to close the ethics, knowledge, belief, and belonging gaps; to deepen faith and make beliefs true acted upon belief! The prospects for reaching the unchurched are good right now. The Gallup Organizational reports the following:

- The unchurched today are, by many measures, more religious than they were a decade earlier (when Gallup did a similar study).
- The unchurched have a “significant degree” of traditional religious belief, with only 18 percent claiming no religious affiliation and 63 percent believing the Bible to be either the literal or inspired word of God.
- Fifty-eight percent of the unchurched said they would “definitely,” “probably,” or “possibly” return to church, up from 52 percent in 1978.

- Sixty-eight percent of the unchurched—along with 85 percent of the churches said they would invite others to join their denomination.
- The percentage of children receiving religious training shows a slight upward trend. This fact should contribute to church growth since religious training in youth is related to a person's being churched as an adult.
- Many reasons for being unchurched are practical and apparently could be addressed relatively easily. Half of those who left church after moving, for example, said they never got around to looking for a new church. An intensified invitation program should yield positive results.

In view of these findings there is an indication of a lack of depth of religious conviction.

TWO DOZEN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GROWING CHURCH

If George Gallup, Jr. is right, what then are the characteristics of growing churches that emerge in the mid to late 1990's? There are about two dozen characteristics I have found that are reflected in the growing church today.

A Growing Church is Bible Centered

Without a doubt, regardless of denominational affiliation, a growing church is centered on the inerrant, infallible Word of God. In each church the leaders have distinguished a Biblical definition of the purpose and role of the local church. Growing churches have a large degree of church identity. These churches know who they are, what they teach, and who they are trying to reach with the Gospel. Because it is Bible-Centered everything it does is filtered through the Word of God.

A Growing Church is a Happy Church

One element in all growing churches is that it has a joyful climate. This joyous feeling may be expressed and felt during worship services, business meetings, Sunday School and in the overall tone of communication from one member to other members or even visitors. In growing churches there is a genuine feeling of joy expressed.

A Growing Church is a Creative Church

On by-product of number two above is that the joy expressed is usually a result of the high degree of creativity found in the growing churches ministries. Creativity provides a sense of fulfillment which is contagious in a growing church.

A Growing Church is a Diverse Church

Diversity is the fourth characteristic that growing churches display. In these churches there is a positive attitude towards diversity. Members in these churches are socially, physically, ethnically, and economically diverse. Yet, they are able to accept the reality that what may be meaningful to one member may have little or no meaning to another. Yes, there are some things all fundamental churches need, but how it is fashioned should be targeted with your particular people.

A Growing Church is an Interdependent Church

Unlike the pattern of the 1970's and the 1980's which saw churches seeking an independence, the growing church of the 1990's learns from other pastor's and growing churches.

A Growing Church is in Tune with Today and Tomorrow

A growing church places a high degree of emphasis on today and tomorrow, and very little emphasis on yesterday. Why is this? The main reason is that growing churches are not interested in doing yesterday or even the day before over again. Growing churches' ministries are fresh up-to-date and in tune with the future. Precedent has little to do with growth patterns in growing churches.

A Growing Church Informs its Community

Whether or not you are a member at a growing church, its community sees it as a supportive, redemptive, and affirmative fellowship of God's people. Even if you are an outsider there is high visibility reflected towards the community! It is more than rhetoric; it is a perspective that seeks to continuously inform its community about God's saving grace.

A Growing Church is Intentional in Being Lay Led

From the outset in growing churches there is a large degree of ownership by the laity. These churches intentionally are lay led. Yes, they have biblical leaders, but the laity is responsible for implementing the goals in all forms of the ministry. They realize that there is a need for everyone in the local church to be a servant of God. Servitude is not an option in these types of churches.

A Growing Church is Inspirational

When people are asked why they became a member of a growing church, they respond that the churches meaningful experiences were inspirational. Very little is said about growing up in the church, or having family in the church. A lot

is said about its outreach to nonmembers. Even the little things such as opening Sunday School assemblies are inspirational in growing churches.

A Growing Church is Willing to Change

All growth is a form of change. It involves incorporating new people, creating new groups, adding new staff, and expanding facilities. Growth includes change in the form of adding things, yet it also comes in the form of giving things up. Strangely, those churches which need to grow the most are also those who are more likely to resist change. For fellowship's that are not growing, business as usual will only lead to the continuation of current trends. The problem for members in many churches is that they do not want to change or even disrupt what meager existence they have. Growing churches have a willingness to change structures, customs, and organizations in order to accommodate people more adequately.

A Growing Church Insists on New Members Involvement

Consistently, growing churches insist on getting their new members actively involved. There is the willingness and capability of the growing church to assimilate as well as accept new members into the fellowship of the church. Usually active participation in the general church structure takes place. However, for certain key committees or boards it may take being a member for at least a year.

A Growing Church Has a Healthy Group Structure

Regardless of what form of small group structure these churches use, growing churches have a healthy group structure. Some refer to these groups as Home Groups. Others use the name Cell Group. Still there are churches who use the name Small Groups. All are relatively the same. In these churches there is a positive effort to function, not simply as a congregation of individuals and families, but a congregation of small groups. Outsiders can identify more quickly with the group structure than some forms of corporate worship. Most churches have had a group structure for decades, yet the reference to small group is unfamiliar.

A Growing Church Places a High Priority on Enhancing the Individuals Christian Experience

Growing churches want their members to grow in their personal relationship to God individually. Discipleship choices are plentiful in the majority of growing churches. Lay participation is encouraged and growth is anticipated.

A Growing Church is Evangelistic

Not only does a growing church seek to train its people, but they are constantly developing methods for evangelistic outreach by their members. Yes, the staff models the methodologies, but they are not the only ones doing the Biblical mandate of evangelism.

A Growing Church Has a Strong Leader

In growing churches the role of a strong pastor leader is a crucial factor regarding its future growth and effectiveness. Pastors of healthy growing churches are dynamic leaders and believe all things are possible with God. The pastor of these type of churches accept the responsibility of communication of God's vision for the church. He leads the church in the step by step process of God's vision.

A Growing Church Has a Great Big Vision

The next characteristic of growing churches is that they have a gigantic vision from God. These churches have a sense of unique vision and purpose complete with a clear sense of God's direction! Churches like these have dedicated themselves to be on mission to accomplish the vision. They move toward the God given objective. They are not merely existing playing the church game.

A Growing Church is a Praying Church

Prayer may very well be the single most important characteristic of all growing churches! The point becomes clear, that a church without prayer is apt to experience little or no growth at all. Without exception prayer pervades every other characteristic.

A Growing Church has Spiritual Power

Genuine spiritual power is an outgrowth of genuine prayer. Without the dynamic presence of the Spirit of God worship to enable and effect in increase of Christ's Kingdom, it is not biblical growth. The opposite side of the coin is that many non-growing churches have an arrested spiritual development.

A Growing Church has Men's, Women's, Youth's, and Children's Ministries

The days of only one emphasis are over! In the 1940's and 1950's strong men's ministries led the church growth movement. I still believe they are the forerunner today. Then in the 1960's and 1970's youth wanted specialized ministries. During the 1980's Women's and Children studies were added to the programs of the church. One of the easiest characteristics of a growing church to

delineate is that women, youth and children are treated as children of God and as fully deserving of a Word from God.

A Growing Church Stands Boldly on Social Issues

Not only is the church concerned about the life of individuals inside the doors of the church, but they stand boldly on the social issues facing our world. Issues such as abortion, human sexuality and adultery are taken seriously by these churches. Growing churches are increasingly concerned with changing the structure and systems of society. These churches stand with others to confront issues facing their church and all of American.

A Growing Church Participates in Strategic Planning

Growing churches develop ongoing strategies that will help accomplish the mission of the church and, therefore, move the church toward realizing the fulfillment of its vision. The characteristic of strategic planning helps churches see that it must become intentional regarding the steps it needs to take to accomplish its mission. Evaluation of results are part of this effective planning.

A Growing Church Provides Growth Experience

More can be done through growth experience such as a singles retreat, marriage enrichment seminar, parents of preschoolers conference, than just a single sermon on the subjects. Active roles of the laity help the church grow.

Growing Churches Preach with Biblical Authority

These churches have taken the stand that the Bible is God's Holy, inerrant, infallible, authoritative Word!

Growing Churches Use Quality and Quantity as Measurements

The staff and senior pastor's of growing churches are just as interested in the quality as the quantity of growth. Where small churches emphasize quality improvements first, growing churches stress a balance of both.

I realize that not every growing church will have all twenty four characteristics I developed above, but they will have a majority. The faster of these growing churches will usually display at least seventeen or more. Church growth has a divine aspect first, which starts with God and His sovereignty. Then, it has a human aspect, when Jesus told us to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:8). No growth has ever been accomplished in the church without the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. With that in clear view, I close this work with a brief summation of the Holy Spirit's work in church growth.

In the Gospel of John the Holy Spirit teaches believers. John 14:25 says “these things have I spoken unto you, being yet present with you.” Just as real believers are introduced to Jesus Christ by the powerful witness of the Holy Spirit, they learn of the Master through that same power. The Holy Spirit giving or teaching the believer is a lot more than factual knowledge, it is a continuously developing spiritual awareness.

Secondly, the Book of Acts states that the Holy Spirit empowers believers. In Acts 1:8 Luke says, “But ye shall receive power, after the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” The Holy Spirit fills the lives of believers through his power to accomplish God’s will. This awesome power makes possible the continuance of Jesus Christ’s work in the lives of each generation of believers.

The third summation concerning the Holy Spirit’s role in church growth is He emboldens the believer. Acts 4:8 states, “Then Peter filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel.” As Peter stood before the council he was inspired or emboldened by the Holy Spirit. Whenever or wherever a Christian witnesses for their Lord, the Holy Spirit provides a boldness to speak and minister for Christ. Regardless of the opposition the Holy Spirit has the power to make us bold for Jesus sake!

The next summation concerning the Holy Spirit’s Role in Church growth is He provides wisdom. In Acts Chapter six verses ten Stephen had just done great wonders and miracles among the people and the scripture says, “and they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke.” The Holy Spirit supplies a discernment that transcends the human element. When the church and its believers are equipped with the wisdom of the Holy One it grows to levels not possible by human standards.

The fifth thing concerning the Holy Spirit’s Role in church growth is He brings the believer and sinner together. Acts 10:19-20 Peter was directed by the Holy Spirit to go to Caesarea. It is through the Holy Spirit that every witnessing opportunity for a believer is the direct result of His guidance. What the word views as coincidental God creates as churches for a witnessing encounter.

The sixth summation of the Holy Spirit’s role in church growth is He calls us to particular works. In Acts 13:2 Paul and Barnabas were ordained as missionaries by the church in Antioch. Directing where they should go and the type of work they should do, the Holy Spirit sends people on a mission launching them into the fields to reap a harvest.

The seventh statement concerning the Holy Spirit’s role is He indwells the saved child of God. Romans 8:9-11 reminds us that a believer never walks

alone after accepting Jesus, and the Holy Spirit serves as the comforter which supplies strength and power to live victoriously over temptation and sin.

Additionally, the next summary thought concerning the Holy Spirit's role in Church Growth is He calls people to Jesus Christ. The first book of the Corinthians in the twelfth chapter and third verse says, "Wherefore I give you to understand that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost." The Holy Spirit gives individuals the faith to believe on Jesus Christ as Savior. As a person takes the step of faith to believe on Jesus Christ as Savior, the Holy Spirit is there to assure and guide in the decision, therefore evading those barriers that may stand in the way of faith, and lifting the person to a new level of understanding.

A ninth aspect of the Holy Spirit's role in church growth is that He enables workers. In the following verse (1 Cor. 12:4) Paul continues, "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same individuals. Each one of us have gifts that are a vital part of the body of Christ as a whole. None of the gifts are dispensable. The Holy Spirit provides a wide variety of gifts since many are needed to allow the church to accomplish its mission.

A tenth summation statement concerning the Holy Spirit's role in church growth is He breaks down human barriers. Once again, in 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul states "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." There is a unity among real believers. Our inability to accept different people is erased by the Holy Spirit. Through Him, all believers become equal.

The eleventh idea about the Holy Spirit's role in church growth is He seals the believer. In Paul's second letter to the people of Corinth he writes, "Who that also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts" (2 Corinthians 1:22). Every believer is assured of eternal life in the wonderful presence of God. In an age where forgiveness of sin does not seem to be important to lost people, this assurance becomes even more attractive.

The last summation regarding the Holy Spirit's work in church growth is He produces fruit in the lives of believers. Galatians 5:22-25 give us the fruits of the Spirit. As Christians we exhibit the positive qualities that attract other people. A loving church displays to the lost community an infectious bond among its members that makes people inquire about the cause, which in turn produces opportunities for witness.

In conclusion, we have looked at various stages of barriers for church growth. Some are bypassed simply, other require carefully planned attention and action. Yet, the fact remains that as believers multiply themselves through their witness and service in the Holy Spirit, He will build on and in their lives for the

Lord's sake. Any individual, group or congregation without the mighty dwelling power of the Holy Spirit is like a plant whose roots do not reach the water. They have no life and certainly no growth. God forgive us if we allow that to happen to God's churches!

Conclusion

1. George Gallup, Jr., "Religion In America: Approaching the Year 2000", The Princeton Religious Research Center, Princeton, 1990.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Wagner, Your Church Can Grow, p. 57.

THREE SYMPTOMS OF A DISEASED CHURCH

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SIX SPLINTERING ATTITUDES
CONFRONTING THE CHURCH

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***THE FIVE GAPS IN THE
RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS OF AMERICANS***

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THE **HOLY**
SPIRIT'S

WORK IN
CHURCH GROWTH

In Twelve
Movements

