

Church Growth

Summary

What needs to happen? In the short term, there are just three essentials.

- New Christians join the church – when Christians transfer from one church to another, this might be Church reshaping, but it's not Church growth.
- Current members do not leave the church – at least, they do not leave (and/or die) faster than new Christians are joining.
- God works through the members, leaders and structures to make this happen – and it helps if the members, leaders and structures are constantly under review, to ensure that they are cooperating and not interfering with His work.

In the medium to long term, one more thing becomes essential.

- The church grows in other places as well.

Detail

Different roles

In Ephesians chapter 4, Paul tells us about the four or five different roles which God gives to the Church to enable it to grow to maturity: pastors and teachers are grouped together. Each role has a different focus, and they are all needed for a healthy, growing church.

- The **evangelists** care about reaching people outside the church with the good news about Jesus and the coming Kingdom.
- The **pastors and teachers** care about helping the people inside the church to thrive and grow.
- The **prophets** care about enabling people to encounter God, to hear Him and respond to Him. Evangelists, pastors and teachers can focus so much on their activities and programmes that they lose sight of God and fail to maintain their connection with Him.
- The **apostles** care about the people in other places, who also need to hear the good news, meet with God and grow in faith. Evangelists, pastors, teachers and prophets all (correctly!) focus on the people here, the people around them, and they can lose sight of the bigger picture.

The church leadership needs to include people from all four groups: you will not prioritise things you do not care about, and you cannot inspire people to do things you are not passionate about.

Every aspect of church growth matters

A healthy church will normally be growing in at least five distinct ways.

- **Numbers.** This is the only way which is easy to measure, and (probably as a consequence) it often seems to be the only one we really care about. Putting the focus only on numbers is wrong, but ignoring the numbers is also wrong. It is vitally important to understand not only what the numbers are doing, but also why.
- **Maturity.** We are no longer to be unstable children, blown around by circumstances, we must not respond to the temporary and unimportant, but prioritise what is lasting and important. Mature people can weather the storms of life, and help others to do the same.
- **Spirituality.** Getting to know God better, recognising His voice, trusting His guidance, resting in His love, relying on His power.
- **Unity.** Learning to know, and love one another, discovering different skills, responsibilities, experience, knowledge and perspectives, and valuing all the differences because unity is not conformity.
- **Ability.** Learning to use everything and every potential that God has given, so that we can play the part He has given, as individuals and as a body, in building His Kingdom.

The tasks of leaders

Leaders in the church have to create and communicate vision. The vision must be consistent with the Bible and specific to the people and their circumstances. You do not invent a vision: you discern God's will for you and for your group, and this rarely happens in a single moment. Leaders have to discover what the 'now' vision is, articulate it and communicate it – affirm it, share it, let others catch it and make it their own.

Sometimes it is suggested that there is no need for a clear vision because increasing numbers alone is a valid objective: it means more people are getting saved. But Jesus did not command us to get people saved: He commanded us to 'make disciples' – which is a very different challenge. We'll come to that in a moment.

The vision should include a church that is not only growing, but also making a difference. Growth alone, for a person or for an organisation, is not enough – what is the point of growing if it doesn't change anything? As many people have observed before: if you are increasing in numbers but nothing else, this is not growth, it is merely getting fat. The church must be making a difference: both proclaiming and demonstrating God's love to the world; and also working as a part of (and not apart from) the rest of the global Church.

If our primary focus is on the world, then it will be clear to the people that we need to learn and to grow in order to meet the challenge; if the focus is on us, we will never get to the place where we feel sufficiently prepared and resourced to reach out to the world.

Leaders in the church need to offer ways to make the vision a reality. The first

step – ‘selling’ the vision – is not simply a technique for getting the people to the point where they can be told what to do. Once the people buy in to the vision, make it their own, they then need to take responsibility for how the vision can be translated from aspiration into reality.

It can be tempting for church leaders to persuade the members to take up something that is presented as a ‘vision’ but is in reality simply a means to motivate the people to adopt a programme the leaders are keen on. Something similar sometimes happens with evangelism, which can be seen as a necessary activity to produce enough church members to keep the church activities running.

We invite people to commit themselves to following Jesus, not because the church needs new converts but because this commitment is the best thing possible for the people involved and because God is calling those people to be part of His plan to build a new creation. They commit to follow Jesus, and this commitment can be lived out through involvement in a particular church and its activities, but that is a matter of individual choice and leading.

The leaders are responsible for offering a compelling vision and offering ways the vision can be made real, but the people are responsible for discerning how to respond – they may want and need help with the discernment process, but it is always their responsibility in the end. The church is a voluntary organisation : the leaders create opportunities, but they don’t control what the members do, and (in God’s Kingdom), they certainly don’t manipulate, bribe or blackmail people into doing the jobs they believe need to be done.

Leaders in the church need to make disciples. When people become disciples, they do not just get converted: they continue to learn and grow. Almost every church has the problem that too few people are trying to do too much, and they have this problem because they are not making disciples. If the members are growing as disciples, they will contribute to the life of the church, they will not drift away and they will not get distracted by hobbies, entertainment or the prospect of promotion.

Many church leaders believe most of their members don’t have time to get properly involved with church work. Sometimes other genuine commitments do seem to get in the way – but if they are genuine, God-given commitments, then responding to them is an essential part of discipleship, not an avoidance of it. But much of the time, the issue is one of priorities rather than commitments – people are not available for church activities because they are not as fun or as fulfilling as the other activities available to them.

Discipleship works when people are engaged in real ministry. It is when our faith meets the real world that we are stretched, challenged and tested. When we reach the limits of our own resources and understanding, we then need the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we need wisdom from the Bible and we need answers to prayer.

Each individual and each congregation needs to understand: I am both unique (God wants to use me as I am, where I am) and united (I am not called to do everything: I need the other members of the Body of Christ, and I need to work in unity with them). They come to understand and believe this not by teaching but by action.

Instead of allowing people to exercise a ministry, we generally give them jobs to do. Sometimes the difference is obvious, but sometimes it is mostly a question of attitude. ‘Please organise the church Garden Fête’ can be a simple exercise in planning and logistics, or it can be an exploration of how the annual event can be fun and generate useful fundraising, but can also be used to extend and strengthen God’s Kingdom in our people and our community.

Leaders in the church need to be enablers (the term Jesus uses is ‘servants’). There are two primary skills required. Firstly, the leaders must help people to recognise the opportunities they already have, discern which ones to respond to, and understand how best to respond.

Secondly, the leaders must work to create the additional opportunities their people need in order to grow, to be stretched, to leave their comfort zone. This requires a very careful balancing act – if they are too comfortable, they never learn; if they are too uncomfortable, they never try. The correct balance is different for every person, and changes with time.

Leaders in the church need to lead by example. You cannot lead where you have not gone; you cannot helpfully lead if you do not understand the current issues, complexities and frustrations; and you cannot inspire people to value things if they cannot see that you value them in your life.

And the example given by leaders should not – must not – be the impression of perfection. Church leaders tend to be good at describing their faults in abstract terms, but describing their successes with specific examples. This gives the impression that, while they are in theory fallible human beings, they are in practice faultless, so they are completely unlike me. This leads to unrealistic expectations, discouragement, and despair: I’ll never be as spiritual as them.

Leaders must honestly lead by example: they must be seen to be following plans and responding to opportunities, being stretched, taking risks and, most importantly, failing at times. If the people never see the leaders failing, they will never learn that failure is an acceptable (even necessary) part of learning, even in church circles.

Next steps

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated. There are three key questions. Is it helpful? Would you change anything? And would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form (<http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>) or join the conversation on the website (<http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>).