

DO I WANT THE CHURCH TO GROW?

It is probably blasphemous even to ask the question. But in the current climate of the church it may need to be raised. There seems to be an unspoken assumption these days that measurable growth (increased attendance and financial support) is a worthy objective for church life. Perhaps it is time to ask whether indicators of quantifiable “growth” should be the first or even the primary goal for the church.

No doubt there is legitimate cause for concern when we look at the statistics. In the context in which I minister, the Anglican Church of Canada, the last fifty years have been profoundly challenging. Numbers are down; finances are tight; buildings are deteriorating; churches are closing. The picture can be discouraging, even depressing. And you do not have to look far to find those who are discouraged and depressed.

But is a call to “congregational development” the only legitimate response? Is there a risk we might develop well organized, smoothly running, efficient communities that have the outward appearance of life but, for the very glamour of their finely polished exteriors, are hindered from experiencing the dependence upon God that is a hallmark of Christian life?

The New Testament is full of images of growth. But, growth in the New Testament is most commonly invisible, mysteriously unfolding according to the hidden purposes and work of God. “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,

and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.” (Mark 4:27,28) This is not growth brought about by the ingenious plans of well-organized human attempts to preserve a struggling institution. This is growth we recognize in hindsight, looking back in wonder and saying, “God gave the growth.” (I Corinthians 3:6)

One of the commonly cited verses of Scripture to justify the call to grow churches is Matthew 28:19, 20 where Jesus gave his disciples the mandate for their ministry. Jesus instructed his disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Jesus makes no mention of signing anyone up to work on a church committee. He does not cite studies of demographics or strategies for growth. There is nothing wrong with committees, study, or strategies; they are just not the purpose for which Jesus commissioned his followers to go to “all nations.”

Jesus’ followers were to go to “all nations” in order to “make disciples.” A disciple follows a master; the master is Jesus. Jesus called his followers to live in a relationship of love and respect with God, with one another and with all the world. Jesus seems to have been less concerned with making sure these relationships were worked out in structured, organized, efficiently run institutions.

One of the earliest illustrations of the fulfillment of Matthew 28:19 and 20 occurs in Acts chapter 8. Philip meets “an Ethiopian eunuch,” “on the road that goes down from

Jerusalem to Gaza.” The eunuch expresses a desire to be baptized. Philip baptizes the eunuch and “When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.” (Acts 8:39) There is no mention that Philip instructed the eunuch to join a community, no indication Philip told him to get involved in any organizational expression of his faith. Philip seems to have been content to trust that the Spirit who had opened the eunuch’s heart was able to guide him in his life as a disciple of Christ.

I wonder if the urgent calls we hear to get the church running more efficiently reflect a similar confidence that God’s Spirit is at work in God’s people in God’s way according to God’s planning and timing. Jesus instructed his disciples not to worry about the things of this world but to “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” (Matthew 6:26) He encouraged them to “consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” (Matthew 6:28,29) How might the church be clothed if we toiled less, and rested more confidently in the God who “so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven”? (Mathew 6:30)

There is nothing inherently wrong with being organized. Indeed, the orderliness of creation suggests that the Creator delights in a certain degree of structure. The question is whether our purpose ought to be to get organized, plan, have visions, and enrol, train

and evaluate volunteers in order to have a growing church. According to the Scriptures this may be the wrong way around; the church does not exist for the church.

Jesus' call to the church at the end of Matthew's Gospel is not first to "come" but first to "go." The church exists to help the world awaken to the presence and action of God in all of creation. Jesus said to his disciples, "You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:14). Being a light may or may not result in increased numbers of church adherents. Increased numbers is not the point. Shining is the point. If we are to shine with the light that is Christ, we must concern ourselves with being that which we hope to shine. We must begin, not with plans, visions and committees, but with a deep awareness of our need to empty ourselves of our agendas, our needs, our expectations, demands, hopes, and aspirations. We must simply surrender to the Spirit who fills vessels that are open to God's presence. The bible calls this "repentance." It is the first instruction Jesus gave to potential followers. (Mark 1:15)

Do I want the church to grow?

Yes I want the church to grow. At least, I want the people in the church to grow. I want us to grow in recognizing our dependence for life, ministry, witness, and hope upon the living presence of God. I want to grow in prayer. I want to grow in love for Jesus, in love for the world and in awareness of God's presence at the heart of life. This hidden inner secret growth may remain small and even invisible throughout my lifetime. It may not be easily measurable. But it will be known by God's Spirit and experienced in the

growth of the Spirit's fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22,23). We may not be able to graph the growth of such qualities in our annual report at the end of the year. But these fruit are the indelible sign of the growth of God's Spirit at work in our midst.

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