

What Makes A Church Grow?

Examining The Common Elements Of Churches That Experience Growth

My grandmother makes a pound cake that is, quite possibly, the best pound cake in the world. But what makes it especially unique is that she seems to be the only one who knows how to make it. Everyone wants to know her secret recipe for what ingredients make her cake so good!

Likewise, many pastors and church leaders want to know what ingredients make a church grow and how to implement them. Why do people come to churches and why do they stay? For that matter, why do they leave? On the one hand, the Bible makes it clear that it is the sovereignty of God that grows churches. Just think of Acts 2. The Spirit came and saved over three thousands souls. This mass growth wasn't a manufactured program.

On the other hand, one cannot help but ask "Are there elements that all growing churches have in common and if so, what are they?"

I suppose I should answer the question: what qualifies me to weigh in on such a dilemma? Though my formal training is in theology, history, apologetics, and counseling, I am drawing on over a decade of formal ministry leadership, either as a youth pastor, interim pastor, or lead pastor. I am also drawing on my experience as a church member all my life. From my earliest days as a baby, church was a priority in the life of my family. I have been a part of a variety of Baptist churches, and even a Presbyterian church, just for some variety! I have been a part of both medium and small churches and have had many conversations with pastors of larger churches. But it is my experience with small churches and the reasons people leave that gives me the most insight into what makes people stay.

I do feel it necessary, before I list these common and essential elements, to insert a disclaimer. I am not necessarily describing what SHOULD keep church people, only what I see as things that actually DO keep church people. In an ideal world, as long as we preach the Bible, people should come but that isn't how it works. And, while we should never compromise our teaching or beliefs for the sake of keeping people, because God prizes faithfulness over results, we should also seek to be as effective in our ministries as possible, because God doesn't prize faithfulness instead of results. It is God who ultimately gives the increase, but, as stated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:6, God uses our ministry to do so.

Having said all that, as I look at churches that grow and as I consider the reasons that people have

left churches over the years, I see four common elements that growing churches implement.

1. Helpful Teaching

How many times have people left churches saying, "I just don't feel like I am being fed"? The teaching and preaching of the church is the most well-known and visible aspect of the ministry and, in most churches, such a ministry rises or falls upon one individual: the pastor. For the vast majority of churches one individual often bears the responsibility for this ministry each week and often multiple times each week.

There are two aspects of this ministry that matter. The first pertains to content of the teaching. Does it match what the Bible says, or at least what I think the Bible says? But the second questions the relevancy of the preaching. Does the preaching speak to my experience, keep my attention, and inspire me to make changes? Unfortunately, the second often overshadows the first. The sad but familiar saying is that people will forgive a lot of bad theology if the message is engaging, humorous, and short.

When people first come to church, in many cases, they do so because of the reputation of the preacher. They have heard from friends or family that the pastor is a gifted communicator and so they decide to give the church a try. But what will keep the new person is whether or not he or she feels that the sermon was actually helpful to them. Reputations may bring people, but they will not keep people. People have to feel like they connect with the message and that it gave them insight to their struggles or inspiration to engage their struggles with new energy.

2. Engaging Music

Let's face it; no one wants to mouth along to a very slow, off pitch version of "Amazing Grace" when they can hear it done professionally on the radio or at a larger church. When we sing songs, we want to feel inspired, motivated, and uplifted.

Now, this statement may surprise a lot of people, but my experience and observation has been that, while some still fight the battle of contemporary verses traditional worship and haven't really figured out yet that the stream has moved and we are no longer at that same fishing hole, the majority of people in churches today are not as concerned with what we sing as they are with how we sing it.

That is not to say that what we sing is not important. It is very important because God is

concerned with the content of what we sing. Yet, when churches sing their songs with conviction, joy, volume, and quality, the people feel engaged. But when the music is seen as an element of the service that is there to simply get us to the sermon, the musicians are not practiced or engaged, the congregation does not know the words or melodies, there are constant technological distractions, or the people around them are not engaged, people will not feel like the music is meaningful. When the congregation can personally connect with the music, they feel inspired and encouraged.

3. Significant Youth And Children's Ministry

"Is there something for my kids?" is the question of the day. Because church is considered a family activity, and rightfully so, parents want the church to provide ministries that are aimed at their children and that their children want to attend. For their part, kids and teens are looking for ministries that speak to the issues they face, that are engaging, and that their friends also attend.

There are many reasons for this. For one thing, when a church offers ministries that kids want to attend, it sure makes getting those kids out of bed on Sunday morning easier for the parents! In addition, parents feel more focused during the service when they are not distracted by having to discipline or refocus their children.

Ultimately, this point is so important because churches that focus on children's ministry send a clear message: "we believe kids matter!" Churches that spend time, money, and energy investing in kids show that they believe kids are valuable to God where they are, not just because they will one day become adults who tithe! When a church places value and priority upon youth ministries, visitors translate that experience into a belief that all lives matter.

4. Meaningful Relationships

When the relationships formed at church bring encouragement, companionship, and stability to a person's life, those relationships can be a powerful force. A person can find their pastor dry as dirt, the music can be atrocious, and the one church Sunday school class can include all ages so that the one baby in the nursery simply has to cry her way through, and the person can still find that they love their church because of the friendships he or she has developed.

But the opposite is also true. A pastor can be the next Billy Graham, the music can be sung by Chris Tomlin, and the youth program can be the size of a church by itself, but if a person does not feel loved or known, he or she will not stay long. People come to church because they want to experience God and because they want to feel like they belong

somewhere. A church that makes people feel welcomed, loved, and known by greeting new people and by investing in them for the long haul will be a church that people want to come to again.

These elements are the most common characteristics of growing churches. All growing churches do well in these areas. There may be more to it than that, but there is certainly not less. The question that remains is whether or not these elements can be used as a gauge of sorts to evaluate the potential of a church for growth or to diagnose the reasons a church may not be growing. By writing this article, I obviously tip my hand that I believe they can serve as such.

Generally speaking, churches that are strong on all four of these elements will grow significantly. Churches with three of these elements may not grow as fast or large, but may still experience growth. Churches that are only strong on two of these elements should be very concerned and should be brainstorming ideas for how to change. Finally, churches that are only strong in one area will not grow numerically in any type of significant way. Does it matter which elements the church has more or less of? In my experience, no. Very rarely are churches strong on all four of these elements. Much more often, churches are strong in some areas and weak in others. Some have strong preaching but a poor youth ministry. Some have excellent music but distant relationships. But the bottom line is that all growing churches pursue these common elements.

How can a church grow in these areas? First, a church needs to honestly evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. Second, churches need to emphasize their strengths. For example, if a church does well with preaching, the preacher should then be given more scheduled time in the service and his sermons should be recorded and given away as an outreach. If a church is well known for its children's ministries, these ministries should be celebrated, advertised, and given ample funding priority.

Finally, churches need to grow in their weak areas. The pastor may need to read up on helpful books that discuss preaching in order to be more effective. Churches may need to add additional staff to provide knowledge, experience, and skill in the areas needing growth. The leadership of the church will also need to do serious thinking about practical ways to improve in these areas. May God give us the wisdom and passion to grow His church for His glory!