

Growth and Non-Growth in Churches

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1. A vision for church growth: developing church growth consciences and eyes (definitions from Wagner, ed., Church Growth: State of the Art, p. 284).
 - a. Church growth conscience: "The conviction that God's will is for the body of Christ to grow".
 - b. Church growth eyes: "A characteristic of Christians who have achieved an ability to see the possibilities for growth and to apply appropriate strategies to gain maximum results for Christ and his Church."
2. Types of church growth. There are three major types of growth in the church that can be examined: quantity, quality, and organic (or organizational).

- a. Quantity church growth

- i. Expansion growth (or numerical growth; Acts 2:41)
- ii. Extension growth (defined as establishing daughter churches in the same general homogeneous group as the mother church; Acts 9:31, 16:5)
- iii. Bridging growth (defined as establishing churches in different cultural areas; Paul's evangelism on Mars Hill would be an example of this; Acts 17:16-34)

- b. Quality church growth

Wagner and Gorusch, through a survey taken of D.Min. students, have identified thirteen "constituent parts of quality" to look for in a church (Wagner and Gorsuch, "The Quality Church"; we have listed them in order of perceived significance as indicated in a survey conducted by Leadership magazine):

- i. *Bible knowledge*: Church members are increasing in their grasp of the teachings of the Bible. They can integrate this with a theological system that enables them to apply the Bible's teachings to their life situations.
- ii. *Personal devotions*: Members spend time daily in prayer, Bible reading, meditation, and other personal spiritual exercises.
- iii. *Worship*: Members regularly participate in the worship services scheduled by the church.
- iv. *Witnessing*: Members regularly attempt to share their faith in Jesus Christ with unbelievers.
- v. *Lay ministry*: The lay people of the church are engaged in such ministries as teaching and discipling. In some cases this happens through consciously discovering, developing, and using their spiritual gifts.
- vi. *Missions*: The church actively supports missions, organizing and sustaining a strong program for recruiting, sending, and financing home and foreign missionaries.
- vii. *Giving*: Members give an appropriate portion of their income to the local church and/or to other Christian causes.
- viii. *Fellowship*: Members are growing in their personal relationships with each other through

regular participation in church fellowship groups of one kind or another.

- ix. *Distinctive lifestyle:* Members generally manifest their faith in Christ by living a lifestyle clearly and noticeably distinct from that of non-Christians in the same community.
- x. *Attitude toward religion:* Church members regard their involvement in the church primarily as a service to God rather than a means to fulfill personal needs.
- xi. *Social service:* Members are serving others outside the congregation. This includes direct personal involvement with the poor and needy, or in programs designed to help the needy.
- xii. *Membership growth:* New people are joining the church and being assimilated into its life so that there is an annual net membership increase.
- xiii. *Social justice:* Either through the congregation as a whole or through specialized Christian agencies, members are striving to make changes in sociopolitical structures that will contribute to a more moral and just society.

What do we see about quality growth in the NT? The following chart summarizes the major emphases:

Quality Growth in the NT		
Growth in our relationship to God	Individually	Growth in faith (2 Cor. 10:15; 2 Thes. 1:3; 2 Pet. 1:5-8)
		Growth in knowledge of God (Col. 1:10)
		Growth in grace and knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18)
		Growth in all aspects into Him (Eph. 4:15)
		Growth in respect to salvation (1 Pet. 2:2)
	Corporately	Growth as the body of Christ (Col. 2:19)
		Growth into a holy temple in the Lord (Eph. 2:21)
		Growth in giving thanks to God (2 Cor. 4:15)
Growth in godliness	Individually	Growth in faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and Christian love (2 Pet. 1:5-8)
		Growth in walking as we ought to walk (1 Thes. 4:1)
		Growth in behaving properly towards outsiders (1 Thes. 4:9-12)
		Growth in love (Eph. 4:16, Phil. 1:9, 1 Thes. 3:12, 2 Thes. 1:3)
		Growth in generosity (2 Cor. 8:7; 9:10-11)
	Corporately	Growth in edifying the church (1 Cor. 14:12)
		Growth in the work of the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58)
		Growth in love of outsiders (1 Thes. 3:12)

- c. Organic (or organizational) growth: Organic growth refers to the infrastructure or cell group growth of a church (Singletary, "Organic Growth", p. 114).

3. Causes of growth and non-growth:

a. A note on God's role and our role in church growth

- i. The fact of the tension: In trying to interrelate the infinite God with the finite people we will of necessity face tensions. Scripture presents two facts that we find difficult to reconcile:

God is sovereignly in control of the every aspect of the entire universe.	Every person is fully responsible before God for all of his or her actions.
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ii. Some of the areas in which this tension manifests itself are:

- (1) How "free" is our "free" will? Are there boundaries to our will, and, if so, how far do they extend? For example, can we in any way thwart God's plan?
- (2) How does God "outside of time" relate to a person bounded by time? Is God's foreknowledge based on Him "seeing" the future or "determining" it? Does God "force" our free choice, or merely see that we will "freely" make it?
- (3) How is evil to be explained? Does God "use" secondary causes (e.g., Satan), and does this absolve Him of "responsibility" for evil, since even these secondary causes can only do His will?
- (4) Is there more than one "will" of God? For example, God "desires" that no one should perish, yet some do. Does 2 Pet. 3:9 express His "will" or His "want"?
- (5) How can God be a transcendent being (one who is above space and time, one who has all authority, and who is thus necessarily unknowable to us in the ultimate sense) and yet still a personal one who desires to interact with people? Is it possible for us to talk meaningfully about a transcendent being?
- (6) Can a true Christian lose his/her salvation? If we focus on God's sovereignty, the answer appears to be "No". If we focus on our responsibility, the answer appears to be "Yes".

iii. Concerning God's role and our role in church growth, several passages may be noted:

Mark 4:26-29: He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. **A man scatters seed on the ground.** 27 Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. 28 **All by itself the soil produces grain**-- first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. 29 As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

1 Corinthians 3:5-15: What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 **I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.** 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 **The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose**, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. 10 By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone

else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. 11. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, 13 his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. 14 If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. 15 If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Ephesians 2:18-22: For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. 19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 **In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.**

Ephesians 4:7-16: **But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.** 8 This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." 9 (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? 10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) 11 **It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service,** so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 **From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.**

Colossians 2:18-19: Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. 19 **He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.**

Philippians 2:12-13: Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--**continue to work out your salvation** with fear and trembling, 13 **for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.**

iv. Some basic facts

- (1) At the core, church growth is a dynamic of spiritual warfare. Satan and his hosts do not want people to come to Christ, and they do not want Christians to grow in their relationship with Christ. Every step of growth in the life of a Christian is a victory the cosmic conflict that God has already eternally won through Christ's work on the cross.
- (2) Apart from the working of the Spirit of God, the church may grow as an organization, but it will not grow as an organism.

- (3) Sheer numerical growth is not a necessary or sufficient proof of God's blessing on any particular church.
- (4) God, who causes the growth, entrusts to us as His children the responsibility of participating in His work. In some mysterious way, He has chosen to 'limit' Himself to working through His human agents.
- b. What factors have church growth studies found to be related to growth? The following list is a compilation of positive and negative factors from various sources (Vaughan, "Trends", pp. 131-33; Church Growth: State of the Art, p. 282; Jenson, Always Advancing, pp. 19-30; Gerig, "Climate Controls"; Wagner, Leading Your Church to Growth, pp. 34-39; Wagner, Your Church Can Grow, p. 49; McGavran, Understanding, pp. 163-4; Anderson, "Discovering Growth Possibilities", pp. 330-33; Wagner, Leading Your Church, pp. 182-5):

POSITIVE

NEGATIVE

"SPIRIT" FACTORS

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Faith, prayer and the power of the Spirit are explicitly recognized: All three are high on the public agenda, and play a vital role in the dynamic empowerment for these churches. 2. A Positive Atmosphere: growing churches emphasize what God <i>can</i> do, not what He cannot do! 3. Obedience: includes obedience to the Word and its commands (knowledge of these is necessary for obedience!) 4. Priorities arranged in biblical order. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Saint John's Syndrome: Like some of the churches in Asia Minor which are mentioned in Revelation, this is seen in a church that is lukewarm and/or nominal. 2. Limited faith on the part of the church. 3. No desire to grow. 4. Arrested spiritual development: When churches are not well-fed from the Word of God and normal quality growth is severely inhibited (if not stopped altogether). 5. 'Bad air' generated by self-centered bickering within a church. 6. Unworthy Christian conduct by members of the church. |
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LEADERSHIP

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The average tenure for the twenty largest churches in the world is twenty years 2. The pastor must want the church to grow and be willing to pay the price. 3. Effective leadership: Longevity is important: research indicates that it takes seven to twelve years to energize a church. 4. A pastor who is a possibility thinker and whose dynamic leadership has been used to catalyze the entire church into action for growth. 5. Trust: A climate of trust, which must be earned by those in leadership positions in the church. 6. Mobilized leaders who are "equipping the saints for service" rather than doing it all themselves. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of vision. 2. Misplaced priorities. 3. The ministry was too highly trained and paid, was not one with the people, and could not be supported by the churches themselves. |
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LAITY

1. Multiple-level commitments in four areas: friendship level (2 to 4); support group level (8 to 14); sub-congregational level (40 to 80); and worship level (unlimited)
 2. **Mobilization:** involves a leadership that sees and implements its ministry of equipping the congregation, multiplication, proper utilization of gifts, outreach and enfolding, active and positive witness in the community.
 3. A well-mobilized laity which has discovered, has developed, and is using all the spiritual gifts for growth.
 4. **Cell structure:** As they grow larger, they keep their structure centered on small cell groups. Teacher-pupil ratios tend not to exceed 1:25, and average 1:14 for these churches!
 5. **Community:** includes a sense of belongingness and mutual commitment, deep interpersonal relationships characterized by *agape* love.
 6. Role specialization: people are actually using their gifts.
1. Spiritual 'birth control', seen in undue attention to inward growth
 2. Excessive feeling of 'family' within the church, and feelings of irritation towards 'outsiders'

EXPANSION

1. **People movement evangelism:** Evangelism focuses (not always consciously) on receptive people groups, resulting in people movements.
 2. The people must want the church to grow and be willing to pay the price.
 3. Evangelistic methods that have proved to make disciples.
 4. The church must agree that the goal of evangelism is to make disciples.
 5. **Aggressive church planting:** Seven of the twenty largest churches have started at least 1400 new congregations!
 6. **Oriented to Outreach:** A mentality of reaching out to others, not just catering to internal church needs.
1. Church and mission allowed themselves to remain stuck in an area of low potential.
 2. They did not learn the language of the people, worked always in English, and so established the image that the Christian religion signifies mainly cultural advance. They thus got a few of the rebel young men on their way out of the tribe, but very few older men or families.
 3. A limited number of unreached people in a church's field.
 4. They 'worked with' resistant homogeneous groups, instead of baptizing the receptive units available to them.
 5. Church and mission were devoted to an only slightly productive pattern instead of a highly productive one.
 6. **Koinonitis:** "Fellowship inflammation", when Christians develop fellowship to such an exaggerated extent that all their attention and energies are being absorbed by other Christians.
 7. Fearing the problems brought in by converts and churches made up of new Christians, they set very high standards and baptized few.
 8. They accepted gradualism as a sufficient mission method.

ORGANIZATION

1. **Flexibility in meeting:** The Western and former Communist bloc churches tend to have multiple services in one facility. The non-Western churches tend to have that as well as multiple locations (usually homes) scattered around the city for smaller mini-congregation meetings.
 2. **Flexibility:** A willingness to experiment, to innovate, and even to fail.
 3. A church big enough to provide the range of services that meet the needs and expectations of its members.
 4. **A Serving Spirit:** This is the summary of a good "growth climate". When people genuinely want to serve, they will be positive, trustworthy, devoted to excellence, oriented to outreach, and flexible.
 5. **Vision and management:** includes goals, dreams, leadership, organization, implementation, analysis and evaluation.
 6. **Excellence:** The best utilization of the resources that God has entrusted to us.
 7. Common purpose and philosophy in regard to self-image, purpose for existence, and discipline
 8. Balance between outreach and feeding
 9. The proper balance of the dynamic relationship between celebration, congregation, and cell.
1. Leaders were chained to existent maintenance work. Or church and mission were devoted to a nonproductive pattern, once needed but long outmoded.
 2. Leaders did not learn about church growth from mistakes of the past.
 3. Failure to plan.
 4. Inadequate organization (organic growth), which limits the potential for growth.
 5. **Hyper-cooperativism:** When a church thinks its growing problem will be solved by joining in an evangelistic effort with other churches. Research increasingly shows that cooperative efforts do not yield significant increases in growth for the cooperating churches!

CONTEXT

1. A membership drawn primarily from one homogeneous movement (HUP--are we ready to agree with this as a goal of the church???)
 2. Congregational links to the community
1. **People blindness:** When churches do not recognize the important cultural differences that glue large social groups together and which can become barriers to communication of the Gospel.
 2. **Ethnikitis:** when the community around the church changes in ethnicity and the church does not (or cannot) change with it. Seen mostly in urban areas.
 3. Cultural differences between the church and the target people.
 4. **Old age:** when the community around the church is disintegrating due to contextual factors beyond the control of the church. Seen mostly in rural areas.
 5. **Sociological strangulation:** When a church outgrows its physical facilities. In the North American context, if more than eighty percent of the seats are filled in a worship service, the church is already losing potential members.

The following table summarizes areas of possible analysis for growth in a church (N.B. the factors are not listed in order of importance):

Area	Factors to Analyze
"Spirit" Factors	Theological foundations, faith, prayer, Spirit generated individual and corporate revival, miracles, worship, giftedness, obedience to God's Word, spiritual maturity, spiritual warfare
Leadership	Serving heart, vision, planning, equipping, disciplining, submission to God
Laity	Involvement, community/bonding, commitment
Organization	Managing, atmosphere, freshness, openness to innovation, response to felt needs, finances
Expansion	Sense of evangelistic purpose, tools and methods of outreach, momentum, influx of fresh new members
Context	Demographics (especially local population change), local religion(s), larger cultural change/stress factors, political government, culture and attitude toward religious conversion

4. A final note on cycles of growth: All movements experience periods of faster and slower growth. One important element of leading a growing church is
 - a. Being able to identify when a church is slowing in its growth
 - b. Being able to identify the reasons a church is slowing in its growth and taking corrective steps.