

What if "Real Church Growth" Became the New Normal in the North American Church?

If we're honest, it's pretty easy to see the functional Great Commission in North America: *Go into all the world and make more worship attenders, baptizing them in the name of small groups, and teaching them to volunteer a few times a month.*

For all kinds of reasons, the words "church" and "growth" have become embarrassing when put side by side. Yet just because the lingo of the Church Growth Movement has departed from our lips doesn't mean that the model isn't still firmly rooted in our hearts and minds. Though the facade of church growth has been stripped off our institutions, the bones of the house are right where they've always been.

More than we'd like to admit, **our default strategy for seeing people come to faith in Jesus begins and ends with pumping people through our priority programs.** It's the classic attractational mindset.

And by the way, you can find it in *every* church—including those that wouldn't be caught dead being associated with those "sell-out" *attractational churches* and also in those that simply aren't attracting people very well.

Desperate for a measure that matters

Ask yourself this question: Why do people come to your church (or any church)? Most likely, it's for:

- **Place:** the beauty, convenience, or sentimental attachments of the place
- **Personality:** affection for a leader
- **Program:** what they (or more likely, their kids) receive from a certain program
- **People:** friendships within that community

Not one of these "P's" are bad. In fact, all of them are good. Like the lower story of a house, no one gets inside without going through them as the entry level.

But are these all the church is for? When any of us responded to God's call to devote our lives to serve the church, was it because we were so in love with *these things*? I doubt it. They weren't enough to draw us to the bride of Christ, and they aren't enough to keep us in love with her either.

When we toil away at the work of the Lord—desperate for some sign that we're getting somewhere and that our work is not in vain—it's the most natural thing in the world to hunt for some proxy indicator that we're not wasting our time.

Enter programs.

When we can count the flow of bodies through the pipelines of our program plumbing—well, we must do something right. *Right?*

Don't throw out the baby

The dirty little secret among so many pastors is that **we are really good at faking disciples rather than making disciples**. The quantity and quality of our programs—and our sheer busyness keeping it all going—distract us from the truth.

Some pastors do recognize it, and they are so fed up with the superficiality of program jockeying that they're ready to reject church growth altogether with all the attendance-, program-, and purpose-drivenness that comes with it.

That is a mistake. While we throw out the "church growth movement" bathwater, let's not throw out the baby as well. There truly is a line that connects the dots of *growth* and *disciple-making*.

In short, if there is one thing I'm sure of, it's that **the best way to grow your church is by growing your people**. I'm on the warpath for this principle, which I call "**real church growth**."

Real church growth

Why should we give up on church growth? Why shouldn't it be something we're looking after, praying after, knocking on the doors of heaven for? Why wouldn't we want to disciple people in such a way that they are empowered and emboldened to lead people to Christ? We shouldn't give up on growing the church as people come to faith in Jesus. Jesus says we should expect fruit (and fruit that lasts!).

But there's a certain way he's set everything up. "Real church growth" takes seriously the idea that if your church grows past 120 people, you have to ask the question, "**What does organized disciple-making look like in this context?**"

At the end of the day, it's about this:

Real Church Growth = Organized Disciple-Making

And, "Organized Disciple-Making" does not equate to the programs you're running—or, for that matter, to the programs the "bigger and better" church down the street or the one across the country is running.

See, if you're not doing organized disciple-making, my guess is that you're doing programmatic education in the name of Jesus. But chances are, it's "untransformational Christian education." It may be well-executed and it might look good on Facebook or Instagram, but it's probably not growing your church, nor is it really growing your people.

When I talk to pastors, I'm not interested in a church's programs to mass-manufacture the

raised-religious. I want to hear about their organized disciple-making process. I'm talking about **how a church sets up a simple system that helps disciples of Jesus make brand-new disciples, who in turn make still more.**

Real church growth. What if that became the new normal in the North American church?

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