

Church Growth Rhetoric: is bigger always better?

Kevin Ward, *Candour*, October 2011

If you ask almost any church leader about how their church is going, most likely the response will be given in numbers of some kind. The numbers at worship on Sunday, growth in membership or how many new Christians they have seen in the past year. It is a cause for reflection that this kind of response would only have been given over the past century or so (perhaps even half century).

For most of its history the question church leaders were more concerned with was what made a true church or a faithful church. A church that bore authentic witness to the gospel. We find this the constant concern of Paul in his letters. The early church gave its answer in the creeds as when the church is “one, holy, catholic” and “apostolic”. During the Protestant Reformation the reformers, sure that the Roman Catholic Church was no longer this, added that it is where the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered. As the Protestant movement fragmented other defining characteristics were given by different groups, but still seeking to answer the question of what was a true of faithful church.

A different understanding of the church developed as Christianity moved from what had become its homeland in Europe, to North America. With the gradual abolition of state churches came the development of the new form of the denominational church and along with that the understanding and legal definition of the church as a voluntary association of like minded individuals. Church was sometimes seen not as a unity or communal body, but a collection of individuals coming together for their mutual benefit. Within this there was a much greater focus on the local, the congregation, than the wider connexional church. These forms developed within an open market place and led inevitably to a more competitive attitude to church life and a greater focus on winning people to their church. In the twentieth century, with its increasing individualism and consumerist approach to life, churches came to be seen more and more as vendors of religious goods and services. It is in this more open and market oriented context that the church growth movement developed and began to ask fundamentally different questions about the nature of church life. Very few people now talk about the nature of the church. Instead of asking “What are the marks of a true or faithful church?” it became about “What are the marks of a successful church, or a growing church?”

It needs to be recognised that the church growth movement developed during the 1960s and 1970s in a time of considerable pessimism about the future of the church, when attendance and membership plummeted. It sought to develop ‘scientific’ principles that could reverse this trend. Its focus was on factors within the life of a church that could be altered to make it more effective and so grow. The emphasis of the movement has reinforced the notion that numerical growth is the pre-eminent measure of success of a church. The assumption has been made that a church that is growing numerically is also likely to be one that is effective and developing in other aspects as well. Further, the concepts of growth and effectiveness have often been equated with size. ‘Big’ churches must be ‘growing’ churches and therefore effective. Consequently by examining the characteristics of growing churches and therefore as a result, usually, large churches it is assumed the factors that contribute to this success could be determined. This was the basis of the church growth literature.

I do not want to completely bag the whole notion of growth as something we should be concerned about in thinking about as we seek to be more faithful ministers of the gospel and leaders of the church, at both a local and national level. However I have become more and more convinced that it is not what our focus should be. Growth if it does come, is like many of the best things in life, a by product of a focus on other more important, and I might add 'eternal' qualities. The difficulty is these qualities are often difficult to assess, and in an age that wants to assess, measure and quantify everything, they tend to be placed off the radar. There has, though, been a shift in language as a consequence of the criticisms that have been made of the growth emphasis and focus on numbers. Discussion has moved away from church growth to church health, partly promoted by the popularity of the *Natural Church Development* material. However one often gets the impression that with much of the literature that goes under the name of church health, the goal and criteria are still the same. All that has changed is the language and emphasis. A couple of Canadian researchers put it this way: "Much of the existing literature under the title of church health really deals with church growth. We have come to realize that church health and church growth are not the same thing. It is true though that healthy churches tend to grow as a consequence of what they offer their members."

So having set that framework for the issue that has been raised I want to finish by making three important points.

(1) The first is the importance of context in considering how faithful and I might add effective a church is being in its location. All of the church statistical data shows a significant relationship between the context a church is located in and the likelihood that it will have been experiencing growth or not. Research in the US, for example, shows that megachurches exist almost invariably in an upwardly mobile relatively homogenous areas. An area with young families moving into it is a very different context for a church than an aging older suburb which is losing industry, commercial and retail facilities and schools. Likewise the decline and changing nature of rural populations needs to be taken into account and has, I believe, in fact impacted Presbyterian statistics more than any other church group in New Zealand.

I have been doing some work in rural Taranaki this year, and it has been very enlightening to see the effect in the changing nature of dairying on rural communities. From many small farms with a nearby dairy factory served by a truck collecting milk in cans, to tankers in the 60s and larger more regional factories and then to large articulated tankers with trailers and a few super factories. On top of this has been increasing mechanisation on the farm itself and considerable fewer and larger farms. So for this reason it is important not to set an arbitrary figure of, say, 40 attending worship to measure whether a church should continue or not. I can see considerable merit in a figure like this in an urban or suburban context, but where this may be the only church for some distance, a church that remains somewhat below that may in fact be bearing faithful (and effective) witness to the gospel. It does raise questions about how we can provide effective ministry for those kinds of churches?

(2) A second reflection around growth comes in terms of the church size issue. Is bigger always better? Much of the church growth rhetoric seems to assume this. It develops its criteria from looking at churches that have grown to become large and then makes the assumption that if all churches followed these criteria they would also grow and become large. This is a quite fallacious argument.

- First, it ignores the fact that, despite the rhetoric, the vast majority of those coming to these churches are people who have moved from other churches, and not people who have been evangelised and come to faith from outside of the church community. Thus while it may have led to the growth of some particular churches, it has not led to the growth of the church overall, or the kingdom (reign) of God to look at the larger and even more significant picture. Hence the declining percentage of church attenders in all western countries, despite the growth of a good number of larger churches.
- Secondly it could be that in fact by now (we have had four decades of this kind of rhetoric) all those who want to go to large churches are in fact already going, and to close down smaller churches, as some within this school advocate, would simply lead to more and faster decline in the church overall.

Now, once again I am not waging a campaign against large churches. I have been involved in a variety of way with (and still consider myself and honorary member of) one of the largest churches in New Zealand for all of my adult Christian life. Many play an important part in Christian witness to the gospel and can do important things that smaller churches cannot do, although may be able to if they were to genuinely learn to cooperate together and share resources (including ministry) instead of being preoccupied with their own patch. I believe we need a variety of church types, and size is one of those variables. However it is clear that sustaining a model of church life served by a fulltime minister and possessing its own independent building is not really feasible with less than about 120 in regular attendance. Thus looking at our understanding of and models for ministry, as well as rethinking how we use buildings, are important factors as we move forward.

(3) A final consideration is the way in which a preoccupation with growth and size leads to a pragmatic approach to church life and ministry that can be quite destructive of what the church is actually here for. A church may grow and become large and visible, but it is may no longer be a faithful witness, sign and foretaste of the gospel. Bryan Stone writes that the prevailing models of evangelism fostered by a church growth focus, are “inadequate to the Christian faith, ecclesologically bankrupt, morally vacuous and tyrannized by a means-end causality that is eschatologically hopeless insofar as it externalises the means from the end... Both the ‘end’ and the ‘means’ then tyrannize the church as it is forced to forget itself and the One whom it follows in the name of both the end and the means. In the process, the church’s fundamental calling to bear faithful witness is edged out in favour of what ‘works’.” When this happens the church in fact ceases to be the church in any true sense of its calling and purpose.

An example of this is the current emphasis on culturally specific or niche marketed churches, seen for instance in some of the Fresh Expressions and Emerging Church approaches. This is a reworking of the old church growth homogenous unit principle that people like to come to faith without having to cross cultural or social barriers, so narrowing yourself to mission and ministry with people just like yourself is the best way to grow the church. This focus was widely criticised when held in the spotlight of texts such as Ephesians 2, Galatians 3 and Romans 15, as well as the whole concern for justice in both Testaments. The gospel is not just about our relationship with God being reconciled but also about our relationships with people who are different from us, as we are all brought into the new community in Christ and the cultural and social barriers that separate us are broken down. The church is to be a witness, to a sign of and foretaste of of this new and reconciled humanity in Christ, what God is working to do for all. As Gordon Fee puts it “If I build a church of people just like me, how

do I know the gospel is working?” It is just one of many cases where a preoccupation with growth, where it becomes the end, corrupts the gospel and the church.

Does growth matter? Yes I think it is important, and I have sufficient faith in what God is about in the world is about, that if we focus on bearing faithful witness to that, then as the parables of the kingdom tell us, in God’s good time, the growth will come and a great harvest will be in evidence. The challenge for us is to keep our focus on what really matters and trust in God and the Spirit, rather than our own agendas and techniques, for the outcome.