

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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Critical Mass

Part 25: Low-Budget Steps to Church Growth

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me (Isa. 6:8).

God had a message to send, and Isaiah volunteered. Money was never the issue. Money is also not the main problem for the absence of local church growth. The absence of the Holy Spirit in the life and work of the local church is the number-one inhibiting factor. After that comes the absence of dedicated members: volunteers. Then comes the absence of a systematic program to mobilize the members, i.e., absence of leadership. Only then is the absence of money a problem.

There are several possible reasons for the absence of the Holy Spirit: sin in the life of the local leaders, lack of prayer on the part of the members, an amillennial eschatology that is suspicious of church growth and openly hostile to revival, an ethnic enclave mentality that resists "gentile" visitors, or the Spirit's present unwillingness to bring salvation to the local church's prime audience (this sometimes happens on the foreign mission field). Until these reasons are pursued and shown to be irrelevant to the local congregation's situation, no new program for church growth should be adopted.

If you attend an anti-growth local church, it may be time to transfer your membership. Your efforts to build the local church will be frustrated. But if your congregation is willing to take some simple steps in order to grow, you should stay. Here are some relatively easy and inexpensive steps that could help. Suggest some of them. See how much resistance they meet.

Organized Prayer

Church growth should begin with a congregation-wide program of systematic prayer for church growth. Begin this prayer project with a time-table of anywhere from six months to a year. All organizational substitutes for this initiating prayer program must be abandoned. Systematic prayer comes first. Members should be encouraged to volunteer to pray at certain times each day for the souls of specific people or specific blocks in town, checking off on a printed sheet when they prayed and for how long. They should hand in or mail in this sheet weekly. This prayer program must be planned and monitored by the elders. It must be official, formal, and structured. I think the data on the sheets should be stored in a computerized data base program. This information is in God's data base; why not in the local church's? Only if there is too much resistance to actual records should the reports be abandoned. Military scouts report to headquarters. Why not church members? The idea here is to make this program an organized effort with measurable input and output.

Having begun a program of systematic prayer for church growth, the local congregation must now make plans for a positive answer to prayer. These plans must be systematic. Volunteers must be requested from the pulpit, by elders, and any other way that the leadership thinks will work.

Invite Your Neighbor to Dinner

Begin a program that shows families how to invite neighbors to dinner. Our generation has forgotten how to do this, which is why nobody knows the name of the families three doors down the block on both sides. The dinner invitation strategy is part of a multi-stage invitation plan. The first evening should be for breaking the ice. The prayer before the meal may be the only sign of the religious commitment of the host.

The point is, friends invite friends to church. Every church should organize regular training sessions on how to make new friends. This can become a major benefit to members, not only for evangelism but also to teach people how to make new friends. The congregation's most successful friend-maker should be recruited to teach these skills.

Greeters

Greeters can be of two types: those who have invited specific visitors and those who volunteer to have a meal ready for first-time walk-ins. The first type of greeter must do everything that the second type does, but with a targeted family. Let us consider in detail the second kind.

The visitor may be part of the walking wounded, or a newcomer in town, or a church shopper-hopper. In each case, his immediate need is for a sense of belonging. This need is intensely personal. He is probably not walking in the door in search of better theology. He is not looking for a more biblical liturgy. He is looking for emotional support in a desert of loneliness. He is looking for an extended family. If your church can offer this, it will prosper. If it can't, it probably won't.

The greeter's crucial task is to serve as a surrogate friend initially and maybe a real friend later. The way to initiate this is through a shared meal. (Let's see: Where do we learn this principle?) The greeting family's wife should be ready to prepare a meal such as chili, stew, or soup. Better yet, the meal should have been prepared before the worship service. If no visitor shows up, the wife can serve the extra portions as leftovers. Families should be ready to eat the same meal two days in a row if no newcomer shows up.

It will take time to estimate how many greeter families are needed each week. A minimum should be two families. Volunteers must be put on a systematic schedule. The person who is in charge of this program should phone the volunteers

the night before church to remind them of their assignments.

Each greeter family should stand at the church door behind the person in charge of greeting. His task is to spot newcomers. He then introduces the newcomer to a greeter family, which then invites him to sit with them. Don't sit up front; newcomers get nervous being put on display. The greeter family can make sure the newcomers have hymnals and printed bulletins. This is crucial. The more the newcomer can be eased into the unfamiliar liturgy, the better. The greeting family has to serve as a kind of buffer, showing the newcomers by example when to stand up, sit down, say a response, or whatever. It would not hurt to whisper a calming word or two if things get off track. ("Sister Mary isn't having convulsions; she's just receiving a message from God. If this continues, Rev. Jones will have one of the elders lead her into our special soundproof 'extended message from God room,' and then we'll all stand and sing hymn 243.")

After the service, the greeter will invite the visiting family to dinner. If the visitors say no, then the greeter should immediately ask them over sometime during the week. Set a date. If there is still resistance, then the greeter should invite them back next week and offer dinner after church. This accomplished, the greeter should then excuse herself and then let the person in charge of the greeters know that there is an extra table of food available if there are surplus visitors. The coordinator can then see if some visitor was neglected.

The person coordinating greeters at the door had better have a gift for names and faces.

The Yellow Pages Listing

Your church is already paying for this. Your money is almost certainly being wasted. You should run a display ad as large as you can afford. The ad should lead with a statement of your congregation's unique service in your community, preferably one that no other congregation offers. Problem: if that service is either liturgy or theology, nobody will call. People don't care about theology and traditional liturgy. Believe me; they really don't. Unless your home missions program is self-consciously a program to pick off members of other churches, list a benefit for the non-Christian visitor. Write it in bold face letters, but not all capital letters, which are difficult to read. Try to keep the promise to 17 words or less. Do not list a slogan; offer a benefit that your congregation really can fulfill. It may take several meetings with members to draw up a list of the benefits for joining. Then pick one for the Yellow Pages headline. Here are samples:

We offer service opportunities for dedicated people who are ready to make a difference in [town].

We train young people to become successful: in school and in life.

We help families struggling with financial difficulties to get control of their budgets and their lives.

Whatever your unique service proposition is, it should be prominently displayed in your Yellow Pages ad. Then comes the church's name (bold face but smaller print), address, time of meetings, phone number, and a note: "Call us for a free

map and a list of our Sunday school programs . . . and if you want one, a daily Bible reading program for people with hardly any time to read." The main rule is this: do not waste space on your church's name, its logo, or anything except its unique service proposition and (if you can afford it), a list of other benefits you offer.

Set up a special phone line for the Yellow Pages ad. This way, you can track where these calls are coming from. Keep a record of these calls. The person who answers the phone is immediately ready to meet the immediate needs of the caller. The caller should be asked to give his name and address, so that the free map (or whatever) can be sent. The caller is already expecting to receive a free item by mail, so he is ready to give out his address. You must get this information.

The Mailing List

The name and address go into a mailing list, even if this list is kept in a card file with 3 by 5 cards. Buy a cheap used computer. If you have almost no funds, buy a used Apple McIntosh SE; don't pay over \$300. It is small, easy to use, and has a built-in screen. Buy three programs: **Claris Works**, **My Advanced Data Base**, and **My Advanced Mailing List**. The last one costs under \$50. This will get your mailing list started. The program is amazingly powerful. Start tracking the data: name, address, phone, dates contacted, responses, interests, business, children, etc. It is far easier to persuade a caller that your church offers him real benefits than to build up a congregation through cold-calling, door-knocking, and tract-passing.

The mailing list should be designed to identify the person's interests. The goal is multiple follow-ups. You should make at least seven contacts in eighteen months. Even if there is no initial result of the contact, letters or postcards sent every few months may produce a positive response. Include in the initial packet you send out to each caller a form that asks for such information as family members' names, ages, birthdays, cultural interests, and other facts that will help your church to meet his needs. To get them to mail back the form, offer a benefit, such as a choice of two or three reports out of a dozen: how to get young children to behave better in public, how to help children learn to read, how to understand the Bible, where to get information on family budgeting, etc. The point is, offer a real benefit for the person to send back that data sheet. Then enter the data and use it to create motivational letters on a regular basis.

Conclusion

If the church is worth attending, it must get this message out to those who ought to be attending, in terms that these people will understand and respond to. This requires a coordinated plan. Set numerical targets for these recruiting programs: number of new visitors, number of repeat visits, number of dinner invitations from members to people on their blocks, number of contacts by mail per quarter, number of follow-ups by greeters. All of this should go into the computer. The elders should know how well its projects are working. The members should know that they are part of a team with a plan.

A bad plan is better than no plan. A bad plan can be revised.

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