

# interact



christian growth ministries

## What Stops Churches Growing?

By Kel Willis

**E**very word was tinged with frustration. 'We've been to countless church growth seminars, established our vision and introduced some of the programs suggested at the seminars, but in the end we're still the same old church, struggling to make a difference in our community.' So said the pastor of a medium-sized city church that was really keen to grow but which lacked the human resources to implement much of what they had heard in the seminars. The leaders had eventually concluded that the target audience for such seminars was actually large churches with significant people resources, and that the advice they had received was almost irrelevant to them.

This story is not uncommon. Whilst I am sure many growth conferences are helpful and no doubt give us new insights, there is often much more to seeing our churches move out of maintenance mode than what is conveyed by speakers who are not where we are. This fact was recently highlighted to me in one of our pastor's mornings. We were discussing evangelism and the need to build good connections with the local community. As I listened to the discussion I realised afresh that all the churches represented that day had different issues to confront and different potential and resources to deal with them. There are no blanket solutions to declining churches. It can be easier to grow a church in a relatively new area where there are lots of young families than in an older more established one. The reality is that the individual culture of a church is established over many years, and so the issues we need to confront, the changes needing to be made and the journey we need to travel will differ from church to church.

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In our consultancy work we are often asked what we mean by church growth, and how it is measured. Is it to do with the spiritual growth of the members or is it to do with how many new people come into the church? Or do the two go hand in hand? In other words, is it possible to have real spiritual growth without non-Christians being influenced by what is happening in the church? But how can we have one without the other? When we are engaging with God and responding to the Holy Spirit's ministry within, changing us from one degree of being like Jesus to another (2 Cor. 3:18), the overflow is a motivation to engage with those around us.

For 30 years I have worked with churches as a consultant, encouraging them to embrace basic principles that help set churches up for growth. However, I must admit that while many of these churches have worked through a process that has transformed their thinking and function, there have been others in which the process has been exceedingly frustrating, and lasting changes have been hard to find! I suspect that part of the reason for this is that our first impulse is generally to look for new methods to help us develop better programs, when our real need is for something to happen within us that creates a new passion to know God in all his fullness and to tap into his love and concern for those who don't know him. It is only then that we will be motivated to engage them with the gospel.

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I recently wrote to a number of pastors of growing churches, both large and small, asking them what makes churches grow. I was surprised at the number of different responses. As I read them I concluded that it might be more helpful to turn the question around and ask what factors *inhibit* the growth of churches. Some of the issues will be more relevant to your church than others, but I am sure that all of

them are worth thinking about, even if only as a measuring stick to evaluate your situation. I am confident that if we deal with the issues that inhibit growth in the church, the result will be real growth.

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## 1. Poor leadership and modeling

Almost all the respondents emphasised the importance of 'biblical leadership'. The influence of leaders (regardless of whether they are good or bad, or whether they are a part of a ministry team, lay leaders or small group leaders) is critical to a church's growth. Somebody recently said of a church they had visited that 'It seemed so directionless and fragmented; there was no evident passion to know God or to reach lost people.' It did not surprise me when they went on to say that the leaders were a cold bunch as well, because one of the key principles in the life of any organisation is that leaders always reproduce themselves! When they are pre-occupied with managing or running programs they lose sight of the nature of biblical leadership, for the church is not a club or a company whose primary needs are management and the application of business principles. The church's imperative is not primarily for 'people to do the jobs' but for leaders who demonstrate love for God and his people, a hunger for his word and a love and passion for those without him. Out of these concerns biblical leaders then oversight the equipping of people for 'works of service'. If this is not their motivation they are part of the problem, and thereby inhibit growth. That's why those appointed to wait on tables in Acts 6 were to be people of godly character, filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

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I was interested to see in the responses to my survey an emphasis on team leadership. We see today a growing emphasis on the importance of accountability in leadership and the collegiate sense of being called together as a team. Teams pray and work together, share, encourage and dream together as they seek the mind of God for the ministry of their local church. In so doing, they provide a wonderful model for the rest of the congregation. The reality is that when the New Testament expounds leadership principles, leaders are always spoken of in the plural. It is hard to sustain biblically the idea of solo leadership in the church.

Leadership is also about influencing, encouraging and motivating people to be the church as it is described in the New Testament. In order to help people grow up spiritually and become a functioning part of the church's life and mission, leaders must model to the congregation all that they encourage them to be in terms of spiritual, emotional and relational health. If it's true that healthy churches are made up of healthy growing Christians, it is also true that those who are the leaders of such congregations model this health and growth as a lifestyle.

One of the survey respondents cited the problem of people moving into leadership for the wrong reasons and without the necessary spiritual qualities. Such people are often unable to model godly behaviour. They may abuse their position, undermine the ministry of the pastor, allow gossip and criticism to remain unchallenged, absolve themselves from dealing with the difficult challenges of the church, and only take on roles they believe will give them status and recognition. Healthy church leadership deals with this kind of mindset, recognising that leaders are to be shepherds who lead, feed and protect the congregations they serve. Along with shepherding and modeling, godly leaders do not rule but have the attitude of a servant heart (Phil. 2:5; Acts 20:17-28).

## 2. A lack of commitment to biblical values

All of us have a set of values that governs our attitudes and behaviour, however few of us can articulate them, and many are more motherhood statements than values. Our values are an expression of what we truly believe and want to be as the people of God, reflecting what we are really committed to. Many of our growing churches have affirmed their core values in a statement that describes their priorities and affirms who they are as a church and how they intend to relate and do ministry together.

Values, spoken or unspoken, are what govern most of what we say and do. Because values help determine character, behaviour and ministry activities, churches that neglect to affirm them will be impacted at every level of their ministry. They will have no expressed framework within which to deal with unbiblical and ungodly behaviour, and nothing to motivate them to grow to godliness, to develop a passion to know God better, to pray or to share the gospel. Nor do they have the criteria by which to evaluate the function of their church.

## 3. A lack of clearly articulated vision

Most of those responding to our survey said that affirming vision was an important part of their church's growth strategy. One pastor said that for their team, vision needed to be both short and long term. Another spoke of the need to be *intentional* about promoting their vision and values. Interestingly vision flowed out of a number of things. A passion to know God better and a passion for mission were frequently the stated driving force in the setting of vision. The visioning process was often the result



of the congregation as a whole or the leadership team reflecting together on the needs and opportunities of the church and community, spawning ideas that grew into vision. In other cases vision grew out of an individual's perception of possibilities in a particular area which were then embraced by the church.

Many of our churches are in maintenance mode; they neither want to disturb the comfort of the status quo nor to test their church life in the fire of biblical scrutiny. I sometimes ask church leaders, 'What drives the ministry of your church?' The usual response is 'Our program' or 'Our pastor'. This indicates their lack of values and that the vacuum is filled with programs and activities, which in turn inhibits vision. Vision that is not driven by values will not motivate



people to be involved. Ultimately, what motivates people to maintain their involvement in the life of their church is what they truly believe deep in their hearts (their values) — the principles and precepts that govern their lives.

Vision has a special unifying effect; it draws people together in a common focus and commitment to see God's purposes achieved through them. The church without vision will lack cohesion within its members as they cling to present and past traditions and resist the possibilities that change can bring. Without the excitement of looking to the possibilities of what God can do, there is no challenge to faith or excitement from seeing specific growth targets become a reality.

#### 4. No strategy to fulfill the vision

Several respondents wrote that setting their vision and goals was relatively easy, but it was making this vision a reality that was more difficult. If vision comes to nothing in the end, the whole process is brought into disrepute. Values are fundamental, vision is essential, but without clear strategies that spell out 'the how to', they mean nothing.

#### Vision has a special unifying effect.

Some years ago the American Institute of Church Growth ran seminars in Australia, encouraging churches to set goals. Many of them began to do just this, but it was quite amazing that so little thought went into the process. Our own church pastor announced one Sunday that his goal was to dramatically increase our Sunday School numbers (which at that time were around 20) and that consequently we needed more space to accommodate this. So we bought a facility nearby and waited for the influx of new children. The problem was that there was no ownership of his vision amongst the general congregation and the implications of it had not been thought through. When I as a member of the church asked some of the important questions like how we intended to connect with the potential Sunday school clientele and what about the teachers needed to run his proposed Sunday School of close to 200, I was told that I lacked faith and would undermine people's confidence in God if I persisted in asking such questions.

In the end, there was almost no increase in the Sunday school, and the site has since been sold. People became disillusioned with the whole idea of vision and even today when we mention goals some of the older people are cynical. The whole process was doomed to failure because it wasn't prayed through and there was no common ownership of the goal, which had just been announced by the pastor. It did not take into account the logistical problem of how to manage such huge numbers, there was no strategy to find and equip the significant number of new teachers that would be required, and there was also the problem of how we were to suddenly connect with a large group of new families in the local community from which the new children would supposedly come, especially when we had had so little connection with them previously.

#### The way the Bible is taught is important.

When I ask pastors who have just articulated their vision and goals to me, 'And how do you intend to do that?' I want to hear them clearly articulate realistic, achievable strategies. A friend of mine often says that goals need to be big enough to challenge our faith, not so small as to be without challenge at all, and so clearly articulated in the context of how they will be achieved that people will respond with excitement and anticipation.

#### 5. Lack of relevant and passionate Bible input

Every respondent affirmed that teaching the Bible was essential for church growth but they also emphasised that *the way* the Bible is taught is important. One pastor said that it needed to be 'passionate and pastoral, giving clear vision'. Another said, 'I need to consistently and persistently explain the Bible as it is expounded and I need to do it in total dependence on the Holy Spirit to give people understanding of its truth and relevance to them.' One pastor spoke of the need to be consistent in his own life with what he taught from the lectern.

Most of these pastors mentioned the importance of having a strategy for building a solid foundation and framework into the lives of the whole church. We have a young man in our church who has recently been converted. It took him a while to grasp the gospel and he has struggled in dealing with his past, however the more he grasps the wonder of what God has done for him, the more excited he is about following Jesus.

## Just teaching the Bible in itself will not make churches grow.

I want to make a point that some may find difficult to embrace. Just teaching the Bible in itself will not make churches grow. I recently heard a man preaching outside the local shopping centre. I am sure he believed he was being obedient and faithful. But his message was so unloving, so harsh and passionless when he told people how lost they were, that my heart felt grieved. In fact I suspect I was the one most moved in those who bothered to catch what he was saying. In essence, his message was from the Bible, but he had turned it into a club with which to beat people as they hurried by, more convinced than ever that Christianity was irrelevant to them. The Bible is God's book of life. My goal in teaching it is that God be revealed, that the gospel to be expounded so that people will come to know Him and then grow in their walk with Him. Teaching the Bible with relevance and passion is an essential part of growing churches.

## 6. Lack of strategic home groups

The word 'strategic' was used by several of the pastors to describe their home groups. Every one of them spoke of how important they were. One described their small groups as the engine, another called them the DNA of the church, and another called them the front door of the church. Not all had the same kind of program but all had good Bible input as a component; prayer and worship was a feature in others. Most of them trained their leaders and potential leaders, but the level of training depended largely upon the resources available to them.

I recently spoke with a pastor who had planted a church in Sydney. Although there are in excess of 100 people in attendance, he felt that his church had reached a plateau and that this was most evident in their small groups, which had developed a sameness about them. Besides obvious things like godly leaders with a good grasp of Bible principles who are committed to the values of their local church and special relationships built through caring and sharing with one another, small groups need a clearly defined and articulated purpose along with strategies to achieve it. As with other church ministries, when there's no sense of purpose small groups will develop a sense of malaise which makes it difficult to remain committed.

## 7. A serious lack of prayer

Several of the churches surveyed had been declining ones that had seen God really intervene. One of the pastors noted that over a long period of time a small group had prayed for God to intervene in their church. When their prayers were answered it was not in the way they expected. They had declined to the point of almost closing down, but through prayerful changes several key appointments went to strong gospel-hearted people, one after the other, and the church is now not only viable but also excited about its potential to reach its very diverse inner-city community. Another said, 'We needed to change the way we thought and spoke of the church because it was so centered in us. Instead of it being our church, our vision, we needed to be reminded that it is His church and His vision and we needed to be seeking His way forward. This of course means that we need to learn to be utterly dependent upon God.'

Churches that do not spend time in prayer, seeking the mind of God and trusting in his intervention in and through their ministry, are by implication depending upon themselves. Such churches tend to degenerate to focusing on their programs and activities. I once heard Os Guinness say that we can build large churches without God having much to do with it. One pastor wrote, 'The most strategic thing we as church leaders can do to see churches grow is not about our ministry or our commitment to evangelism and church growth. These are the fruit of the outflow of a far deeper issue that we seem to have missed: that a growing church is God's work. If this is true, can it be seen in our language, our priorities, our hopes and our approach to seeing God's church grow? If not, then my question is whether we are building on the right foundation (1 Cor. 3:10-15). 'Paul's question to the Galatian Christians: 'What turned you aside?' is as relevant today as it was then. Many in the church seem to have left God out of the equation and have forgotten that he said, 'Without me you can do nothing.'



Dr A T Pearson once said, 'There has never been a spiritual awakening in any country or locality that did not begin in united prayer.' In the midst of our busy church life it is easy to lose sight of God, isn't it? We give lip service to the importance of prayer, but it's a bit hard to fit it into our schedule. We as pastors need to rethink our own prayer lives in order to become better models to those we lead. I suspect that another reason we have such trouble getting people to come for prayer is that group prayer is difficult. This is partly because we do not plan it well and the result is often a bit boring. People need to be engaged with worship and vision, to be enthused with the possibilities and then encouraged by reminders of the way God has answered prayer in the immediate past. They also need to learn to come to grips with spiritual warfare. We are engaged in a battle and need to know how to pray through difficult and humanly impossible situations and how to pray in a spirit of expectancy for lost people.

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## 8. No connection with the world outside the church

The smaller that declining churches become, the easier it is for them to feel under siege. At some point they begin to believe that their community is unreachable and that decline is therefore inevitable. In the process they often continue to affirm their conviction that they need to obey the Great Commission so they finance people to go to the 'mission field', by which they mean places like India or Africa. The incredible thing to me is that the majority of cultures we have sent missionaries to in the past are now living right here in Australia, and in our church's case, within a one kilometer radius! Now I am passionate about sending missionaries to wherever they are needed in the world, but it seems that many of us have lost sight of the incredible mission field right on our own doorstep.

At a recent conference I heard that 40% of our churches have less than 40 members. These churches tend to fall into two camps.



- Members of the first group are quite content with being small in number and often resent the intrusion of newcomers, particularly if they are different. I have heard complaints from people in this category that a newcomer is sitting in their seat! So not only do they not think about growing but they actually have no desire to do so, and are happy to remain as a comfortable Christian club. A friend recently went to a fete at a huge and beautifully ornate sandstone church in the inner west of Sydney. She was bemused but also saddened when she realised that every helper but one was elderly, and all were Caucasian, in the midst of a community with an enormous diversity of ethnic groups. Rather than using the fete as an opportunity to connect with their community, this church seemed to have used it simply to clear out

the junk from their own backyards, and it felt more like a jumble sale in a quaint English village than a church engaging with its community in the heart of a multicultural metropolis. What a lost opportunity!

- Those in the other group I suspect have a desire to grow and see people converted but subconsciously believe it won't happen in their church. Prominent in their minds is their history of consistent decline. They have lost the conviction that growth is possible and have no strategies to achieve it. Perhaps they don't even believe God can make it happen! Fresh thinking, whether it comes from within the group or from outside, is the only way to help such churches gain a renewed sense of the possibilities.

Growing churches have a healthy sense of local and global mission and practice evangelism. They have a heart for the lost and are constantly seeking ways to reach them. Some of the ways listed in the surveys included special evangelistic programs like Life Works, Alpha and Christianity Explained, but the success of these is largely dependent on some connection with non-Christians and the willingness of people to bring their friends to events. Some churches have an ongoing strategy of using their home groups as the contact point for bringing people in. I know of one church whose home groups always have an empty chair out to remind people of the next person they are to be praying for and inviting to their group.

**They have lost the conviction that growth is possible and have no strategies to achieve it.**

Another strategy used by some of the surveyed churches was to establish links with local schools. One church maintains the gardens in their local primary school and uses the school facilities for community events like Christmas carols and football finals. Others connect through playgroups, food days, music nights or church open days.

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Common to all of the surveys was the conviction that we must have a heart for the lost which is demonstrated through clear strategies to connect with our local communities. One of the keys is for those of us in leadership to model a missional heart. It seems to me that a passion for God will always result in a passion for lost people, for that is the heart of God. We must teach and exhort believers to be committed to mission, but if we do not model that commitment ourselves our words are empty and without persuasion. If we are truly in tune with God about this there will be no shortage of possibilities for connecting with people.

In the context of mission we also need to ask ourselves whether we are ready for new Christians in our congregation to challenge the

status quo. I was brought up with a jolt recently when I chose a particular CD to close the morning service. I had presented a message on the second coming and remembered a great old song that had really touched me at the time. Having gone to great lengths to find it I believed it would be a fitting challenge to close the service. At morning tea, several new young adults asked me, 'Where did you get that dirty song from? It ruined your message!' I couldn't imagine them not connecting with it because the words were so great, but the reality is that our taste in music is generations apart! (See Interact 18.3)

Some years ago in Sydney, the logo of the Anthony Horden's department store was a huge Morton Bay fig tree that stood on a hill outside Camden. Their motto was 'While I live I'll grow'. Some vandal poisoned that beautiful old tree and we watched it slowly die. The tragedy of the tree was soon reflected in the store as it found great difficulty making the changes that were a necessary part of modern trading practice. They insisted that they had traded that way for years and would continue to do so. There is no Anthony Horden's store in Sydney today, and whilst the experience of shopping there is a pleasant memory it is nonetheless a distant one.

In the same way, many of our churches have stopped growing because they do not understand the changes necessary for effective ministry within their ministry context. One of the pastors in our survey made the following observation: 'Whilst the pace of change has felt exhausting at times, it's paid huge benefits in minimising the road blocks to innovation. Similarly, the inexperience of our young leadership has led to cringe moments and some regrettable decisions, but overall I think there's a positive energy and excitement about what can be done, rather than a stale calcified deference to what 'ought' to be done.'

You may have read this list and thought, 'But he hasn't mentioned ...' There were obviously other factors listed by the survey respondents but I have focused on those that featured strongly. There was mention of the importance of discipling and training others, especially leaders. Important also was the need for relevant and inspirational worship that affirms the gospel. I personally do not know of a growing church that has not had to wrestle with this issue. (Interact vol. 18 no.3 provides a thought-provoking discussion on this topic in an article entitled 'A Larger View of Worship'.)

More than half of the respondents spoke of how inhibiting and destructive to spiritual vitality are unresolved issues. One church felt that until they were able to deal with ongoing conflict in their midst, they were unable to affirm the gospel with genuineness to their local community. The book *Living with You, Living with Me* published by CGM Publications and available through Christian Growth Ministries (email Kel at [kelwillis@bigpond.com](mailto:kelwillis@bigpond.com)) has several chapters on dealing with conflict and unresolved issues.

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