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Growing churches have deep roots, clearly defined purpose

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ATLANTA (RNS)-Why does one church grow and another just down the street fall stagnant?

Does it have something to do with the type of denomination, the vision of the church and the people sitting in its pews? Or is growth caused or not caused by traffic patterns, economic ties and cultural expectations?

Several factors influence a church's growth, experts say. A friendly atmosphere, community involvement, multiple programs for all age groups and evangelism are obvious.

But other reasons for growth can be harder to pinpoint.

Calvin Miller

“Growth is a fruit, to use a biblical metaphor. It's an outgrowth,” said Thomas Frank, director of Methodist studies and a professor of church administration at Emory University in Atlanta.

“But fruit comes from trees that are deeply rooted. The fruit of growth in the church is drawn on things of tradition. The key here is not just growth, but also a faithfulness to a church's own identity and tradition.”

A survey by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research (www.fact.hartsem.edu) found churches with specific definitions and goals for their members and high standards for personal morality and communal justice have greater vitality as well as growth in membership and financial giving.

Researchers interviewed leaders of 14,301 U.S. congregations of Protestants, Roman Catholics, Mormons, Jews, Muslims and other faith groups. The survey defined growth as an increase of at least 5 percent in Sunday-morning attendance (or Saturday for faith groups that observe the Sabbath on that day) for a five-year period from 1995 through 2000. Fifty-one percent of the congregations involved in the survey reported growth.

But throughout the country, Christianity is on the decline, with a loss of 12 percent in attendance since 1994, said Calvin Miller, professor of preaching and ministry studies at Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

“It's a radical decline, and the more secular cities become, the harder it is to make churches grow,” he said.

“I believe the decline is a matter of attrition for most churches. It reflects a failure to be responsive to the people who we ought to be reaching. They may have gone to church with mom and dad as a child. But now they've grown up, and they just don't enjoy it, and they drift away.”

Growing an established church takes a lot of self-study, Miller said. Congregations must decide if they want to grow, what they need to change to grow and if they will welcome the change that comes along with growth.

Growing churches begins with a survey of the target audience so the church knows the people it wants to serve and understands what has kept these people from coming to the church, he said.

“You have to take away the things that keep a church from growing, because an old-style administration, old-style music, a pastor who isn't relational and a sermon style that no one likes will not make a church grow. Things that make churches grow are kind of edgy.”

While church leaders consider ways to increase the numbers of their church, Frank said, the only real concern is that churches help people in their relationship with God.

“Growth is not the objective of the church. The objective is to be a faithful, Christian community, and when you meet that objective, your church will grow in many ways,” he said.

“You will see growth in the spiritual life of your members, in the commitment of members to the well-being of the community and in the number of people who want to be part of your church.”

Some churches may, indeed, be meant to stay small to fulfill God's vision, Frank said.

“Smaller churches tend to be a face-to-face community,” he said. “Most people tend to know the face of everyone else in a small church.

“At a church where a few hundred people have become 8,000 or 9,000 people, you tend to lose the face-to-face community. People become surrounded by strangers, and they can start feeling overwhelmed by that.”

Some larger churches have taken steps to create small communities, such as weekly Bible study groups of about 15 members within their churches to offer the personal touch people desire in the Christian faith.

When churches grow large, there also is a change in the way decisions are made and in the relationships that longer-standing members have within the church, Frank said.

“It is no longer possible to make decisions in the same way,” he said.

“In a small group, people can make strategic decisions. In a church that has become a large church, people who have been around a long time find themselves at some point being excluded from those decisions.”

They also may find themselves excluded from the direction in which their church is growing—or growing away from—such as traditional songs and preaching styles, Frank said. They begin to wonder, “Who are we?”

In trying to please large numbers of eager new Christians, large churches may fall into the trap of trying to be so relevant in today's world that they forget to deliver the message of an afterlife.

“These churches major on the idea of relevance,” Miller said. “They aren't worried about telling you how to die but on telling you how to live while you are here. You lose a lot of transcendental values. There's a lot of 'how to' sermons—how to forgive your brother and how to build a family.”

In Atlanta, 35 of the congregations in the city's suburbs each have more than 5,000 members.

“The reason these churches thrive is because the suburbs are full of displaced people who have no roots in the community,” Frank said.

“For these people, the large church functions like a small town. It is a place of belonging that fits a wide range of needs. They offer recreation, social

events, even credit unions.”

Large churches also provide that “big religious experience” some Americans are looking for in a church.

“They want their religion to be spectacle,” Frank said. But that is not for everyone, especially those “who want to know everybody and they have a personal relationship with the pastor.”

Some churches aren't meant to go on forever, Frank said. Older churches once in a vibrant neighborhood may now be in an area of town where people have moved out to make way for industrial and business sectors.

“Most (growing) churches are located in places where new people are moving in,” he said. “The healthiest churches are intergenerational with three generations, maybe four, actively involved in the church.”

New congregations grow more easily than long-standing traditional congregations because “they don't have to learn the traditional issues of a Christian faith,” Frank said.

New congregations don't have to sing older hymns or follow traditional liturgical styles if they don't want to. As a new church, they can start their own traditions—which can be attractive to newcomers.

Many of these new churches “have a pep rally feel about them,” Miller said. “They're exciting. The hymns are buoyant, the music is upbeat. The young megachurch connotes excitement.”

The key to growth is “not to adopt somebody else's culture, but to promote your own culture in a more effective way,” Frank said. “I've heard traditional congregations sing songs from 200 years ago, but in a way that is very dynamic and exciting for today.”

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.