

**The Outward Focused Church**  
*The Mindset for Church Growth*  
By Allen Ratta

The following article is one of our key articles on church growth. It has been *expanded and updated* to reflect our latest experiences and research on church growth. Growing churches have commonalities. Everything begins with vision. When you add to that good ministry design and effective processes you have all the necessary ingredients for rapid church growth. ConnectionPower's church software is unique in that it incorporates effective processes so that you do not have to reinvent the wheel.

### **Preparing for Change**

The greatest challenge in overcoming most change initiatives is often found between our ears. We all become "caught in our paradigm" and change requires some level of discomfort or, at a minimum, a level of new energy that we have to expend. Left to our own devices, and absent a compelling need for change, the status quo generally looks pretty good. When a church plateaus in weekly attendance it can become a powerful incentive for church growth.

Pastors, by biblical definition, are essentially change agents. They are out to modify the status quo in the lives of their parishioners. The pastor's eye is continually drawn to disparities. They see and speak on disparities between faith and actions or professed values and actual conduct. Pastors, by virtue of their office, seek to increase faith in what is true. They know all too well that there is a world of difference between mere mental ascent and true faith. It is presumed that true faith will work its way out of the heart and into the day to day lives of people.

There are many areas where we find disparities between what we believe and how we act. The research shows that pastors who have a strong vision for church growth are, by far, the greatest beneficiaries of their vision. Church growth starts with how we think. We have distilled the best of lessons learned from over 20 years of working in the field of church growth into 7 simple laws. They can be found in the article *The Seven Laws of Assimilation*. Law One states, "Visitors represent 100% of your church's growth potential." Most pastors would give hearty mental ascent to the premise but few churches function like they actually believe it! If we really believe it what are we actually doing about it? How seriously are we resources this mission critical ministry of our church? How willing are we to introduce a new way of thinking and acting into the church to effect growth? For a church to successfully navigate the journey to an outward focused church the pastor will have to become a true believer about the well known facts of effective assimilation. There are always practical reasons why some churches are growing and others are not. This article focuses in on the heart of the matter.

### **The Self-Service Mindset**

Most churches today function with a "self-service" model of operations without understanding that there is a better alternative. Make no mistake; the self-service church wants visitors to get connected. They have the same objectives of the full-service church but they execute the mission with a completely different mindset and strategic approach.

The self-service church generally does a reasonable or even exceptional job of promoting events and need-meeting ministries to their guests. The emphasis is on promotions. They are generally good at using every communication channel available: like impassioned pulpit announcements, bulletin inserts, mass mailings and the new emerging tools of well designed web pages and e-newsletters.

In the self-service church the onus is essentially on the visitor to become connected to the church. The process goes like this. The guest comes. The guest is inundated with choices. The guest is responsible to absorb all of the church's promotional materials and to determine which ministries meet their needs and where they might find meaningful connections. This scenario puts the ultimate responsibility on the guest to make the connection. Philosophically the self-service church treats guests like strangers. The church takes a help-yourself attitude towards outsiders. An attitude that says, "It's in the bulletin will not get the job done. In their minds they have completely fulfilled their obligations towards the visitor.

### **The Full-Service Mindset**

There is a very revealing question to ask when a stranger visits. "Is this how you would treat a dear friend of yours who visited your church and was thinking about making it their church home? Of course not! In such a case you would not view them as outsiders but as dear and precious guests. You would proactively call them and excitedly tell them about all of the opportunities that existed for involvement in your church. You would listen and try to discover their needs and actively work to connect them to the need meeting ministries of your church.

What a difference a small shift in perspective and attitude can make! Experience teaches that, as small a paradigm shift as this is, it is not an intuitive or easy one for churches to make. Churches tend to become inward focused on their friends. The vision that guests are a top priority and that the church exists not just for its own members, but to serve the community, takes a protracted period of time. It takes consistent vision casting before a winning attitude towards guests begins to prevail throughout a church. This attitude is a necessary precursor to becoming an outward focused church. Once the mindset and values shift it starts to become a part of the DNA of your church. This is the foundation for church growth.

The full-service church does everything the self-service church does and more. The self-service church will always fall far short of its assimilation potential. Its passive approach lacks the proactive initiative that is the hallmark of great customer service.

Whereas the self-service mindset is all about promotions, the full-service mindset is all about meeting (and exceeding) what the customer wants and needs. This is foundational to great customer service. Visitors are treated as dear guests. Proactive initiatives proliferate both through formal ministry structures and spontaneous expressions of church members.

### **Outward Focused**

Research shows a direct correlation between a full-service mindset and church growth. In the outward focused church, visitors are guests to a critical mass of your church core. In most churches, the natural sociological tendency is to be largely preoccupied with internal matters and close friendships. This can and is overcome through the power of vision and good leadership. The church that is outward focused is supercharged in its visitor assimilation potential. Pastors no longer wonder if they are the only ones who care about outsiders. They will be surrounded by people who are passionate about reaching newcomers. This passion is a key to effectively mobilizing your congregation to provide world-class guest care.

### **Customer Service**

The term customer service, when applied to the church, sounds strange to some and perhaps unspiritual to others. But whatever you call it, customer service is a real and basic requirement of every enterprise that attempts to serve people who walk through their front door. Customer service fundamentally asks, "How can I help?" Great customer service tries to anticipate the needs of others and works to develop offerings and services that meet those needs ahead of

time. Wal-Mart has greeters at the door and employees emblazoned with the words, "How can I help you?" Nordstroms has friendly employees who initiate offers of assistance and personal buyers who know the needs of select clients and watch for new inventory and items on sale. What an impact it would make on church growth if every visitor to a church had a Nordstroms experience!

Many of us have been in our church so long that we have forgotten what it feels like to be looking for a church home. Or we have been Christians so long that we do not intuitively relate to the perspectives and emotions of a seeker who approaches the church looking for spiritual answers for the first time. Years of pastoral ministry can also isolate pastors from the feelings and experiences of newcomers. Customer service begins with the ability to empathize and put ourselves in the shoes of guests who visit our church.

PowerVisitor is church software that empowers a church to execute great customer service towards its visitors. It helps mobilize the right ministry components of a church so that visitors are treated like dear guests. Its proactive outward-focused church ministry systems and training materials help a church, in record time, to migrate from a self-service to a full service mindset.