

Honey I Shrank the Church

Part 1 – Geographic Versus Process-Based Church Growth

By Allen Ratta

Pastoral Stress

It is well known that the pastorate can add additional layers of stress to any family. The chances of this become exponentially greater when the church is in decline. Financial pressures and the anxiety of impending failure can discourage even the most resolute shepherd.

One pastor took a most positive approach when asked by his friend, “How is your latest pastorate coming?” “Well,” he drawled, “this church is going down slower than any other one I have ever pastored.” Given that 85% of churches in the United States are plateaued or declining in weekend worship service attendance, this pastor’s story is no doubt an oft repeated one. However, there is more afoot in the U.S. church than the decline of so many churches. At a time when most churches are in decline and appear impotent in effectively penetrating North American culture, there are a great many that are growing and growing rapidly.

Velcro

We at ConnectionPower call the ability to attract visitors in such a way that they *stick*, your Velcro factor. [PowerVisitor](#) is designed to increase a church’s Velcro factor. High Velcro factor churches have a demonstrative ability to connect outsiders and make them insiders. Non-growing churches always have a low Velcro factor. A church with a low Velcro factor located within a static or non-growing community guarantees a shrinking church because every church has a back door, with the national average about 5%.

High Growth and Low Velcro

You may be surprised to learn that a great many growing churches do not have a high Velcro factor. These churches are *only* growing because of their location in growing communities near new housing developments. These churches often loudly trumpet their growth while blissfully ignoring their dimly low visitor retention rates. They are content to enjoy the benefits of “easy pickings” from the large numbers of relocating families who are visiting their church. This “low hanging fruit” can create a situation where most of the harvestable fruit, located on higher harder to reach branches, remains unpicked. Not only are souls being lost but foundational church DNA is being programmed that guarantees church decline once the community is built out and the easy pickings are gone.

Just the Facts

Decades ago, Donald McGavran, the noted pioneer, missionary researcher and writer, documented the phenomenon of rapid church growth within geographic regions where people groups were being relocated. He contrasted the slow penetration of the gospel in people groups that resided within static communities versus their high receptivity to the gospel with those who were being geographically displaced. This has been evidenced throughout South America in the flight of large numbers of peoples from historic rural settings to urban settings in search of economic opportunities.

Geographic Church Growth

Geographic church growth is far different than “*Process Based*” church growth. *Geographic* church growth has to do with sociological circumstances of a local church rather than the health of the church or the skill of its leadership. These churches are invariably located in rapidly growing communities. In most cases if a pastor from one of these churches were relocated to

more static communities he or she would undergo a major shock. This kind of growth comes from three distinct factors.

1. The increased receptivity to the gospel by those who have been removed from their established family and friendship networks.
2. The presence of large numbers of relocated Christian families necessarily seeking a new church home.
3. The absence of long term stakeholders who hold church leadership hostage to their expectations and demands

Given that visitors represent 100% of your growth potential (see the [First Law of Assimilation](#)) it is no wonder that these churches are indeed growing.

Process Based Church Growth

“Process Based” church growth occurs irrespective of whether a church is located in either a rapidly growing or non-growing community. This kind of church growth has to do with the health of a church’s processes that connect and integrate people. There are three processes that are the key to this kind of growth.

1. Your Magnetism Factor – Outreach
2. Your Velcro Factor – Connection (see [PowerVisitor](#))
3. Your Gravity Well – Integration (see [PowerMember](#), [PowerWeb](#), [PowerGiving](#))

All three of these factors are addressed in detail in my series on Healthy Church processes located in our [archives](#). Every church has these processes in place. The only question is whether they are well developed, healthy and if anyone is consistently looking at the process gates.

Opportunistic Pastoring

It is in vogue today for church planters to do a good bit of demography before selecting a site for a new church plant. The “go” or “no go” factors are often solely based on the anticipated growth rates of the surrounding communities. While it is clear that these new budding communities will need vibrant churches to serve them it is also true that new church plants are the most reliable key to church growth in both new and established communities. One sees the same general trend among pastors of established churches. Pastoral vacancies in California, Florida and growing regions of the country receive far greater numbers of aspiring applicants than do churches located in static communities.

Paying the Price

Success in pastoral ministry needs to be redirected off of gross attendance numbers and on to more reliable measurements of church health. For example, the pastor who develops healthy church systems and processes that lead to a 30% visitor retention rate is far more successful than a pastor with a national average, 10% visitor retention rate. This is true even if the church with a 30% retention rate is growing far more slowly due to its location in a static community. The key biblical imperatives of the Great Commission make it clear that God has called every pastor to skillfully lead their church in such a way as to harvest both low hanging and hard to reach fruit.

Epilogue

[ConnectionPower ministry solutions](#) are full service church management solutions that simultaneously drive key processes for church health. They fill the vast gap between a passive database and effective ministry processes. Our solutions put powerful web-based tools into the hands of *all* your ministry leaders instead of the typical church management system where only one or two actually know how to really use the “church database.” You owe it to yourself to see the ConnectionPower difference! Click here to [see a demo](#) while seated at your computer..