

Some Random Thoughts on Doing Church

by
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Opinions differ greatly on the secrets of church growth, and on the value of evangelistic efforts, and the like, but my observation over 57 years of ministry is that churches either grow very large or they don't, and there seems little that anyone can do about it. The determining factors are time and chance (Ecc 9:11), along with the skills (or lack of them) of the leadership team. A few people are very clever at building big churches (just as some people can build hugely successful businesses), but most pastors are not. Realistically, the average pastor should expect to build no more than an average church.

So despite the multitude of church growth books on the market, the countless strategies that have been devised, and so on, nothing much has changed over the past 40 years. Big churches get to a size and stop there. Little churches get to a size and stop there. So do middle-size ones. And the size of the average Pentecostal congregation in Oz has remained constant, about 80 people.

Some Observations

I have observed churches with excellent pastors, who do a fine job, yet none of their many growth plans, evangelistic outreaches, door-knockings, advertising, special programmes, strategies, etc, ever effect much change in the size of their churches. Indeed, my personal observation of average churches over the years has been four-fold –

first, that church growth arises overwhelmingly from people inviting friends and family, and that the main task of the leaders of the local church is to strive to create a worship service that will favourably impress visitors when they come; and

second, that a given set of leaders (the ministry team) will build a church to the limit of their capacity and after that, no amount of effort will cause it to grow any bigger; and

third, that time and chance are just as determinative of the statistical success of a local church as they are of the success (or failure) of any other human enterprise; and

fourth, that the Lord seldom interferes with those normal processes.

So my advice to the team and to the church is to relax and enjoy life! Remember how Jesus said that his yoke is easy and his burden is light! (Mt 11:29-30)

A Worshipping Community

Let us always, of course, work hard doing what we are called by God to do, but keep a light touch, and allow the Lord to build the church as it pleases him. The best contribution we can make to the task is to create a truly worshipping community, rich in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, fruitful in the life of Christ, and joyful in love and fellowship.

Indeed, I am profoundly convinced that the local church will do its best evangelism and will best realise the purpose God has for it, if it focuses upon becoming truly a worshipping community under the lordship of Christ.

After all, real worship is the *one thing* we can do that the world cannot begin even to emulate, let alone surpass! They can copy almost everything else we do, and often do it better, but worship is uniquely ours.

Yet for all that, the numerical size of a local church (as distinct from its spiritual quality and godly character), will usually be determined by natural factors rather than divine action. The hand of God is certainly needed to turn people into disciples, but gathering a crowd is mostly a matter of circumstance and gifted human enterprise.

Our Real Business

There is confusion about the task of the church, which is —

- not to *persuade*, but to *proclaim*
- not to be *successful*, but to be *faithful*
- not to *set goals*, but to *serve Christ*
- not to *gather a crowd*, but to *make disciples*
- not to *envy* others but to be good *stewards* of what we have
- not to *emulate others* but to *mirror* God's vision of what we should be.

A church full of the life of Christ will certainly attract growth. Nonetheless, the leadership of the local church should hold fast to a *spiritual* rather than to a *secular* focus, always giving Christ pre-eminence in all things.

The Role of the Pastor

A great change has occurred in the role of a pastor over the last 100 years, from a minister of the word (cp. Ac 6:2-4), to everybody's problem-solver. But that is an impossible, indeed absurd, dream. No pastor has the answer to every human need. Even a good pastor can hope only to help a few people with a few of their problems. For the rest, the people should be encouraged first to seek God, then to search the scriptures, then to avail themselves of the numerous professionals who are scattered throughout our communities.

Pastoral visitation seldom serves any useful purpose. If people will not obey the Word when it crosses the pulpit, are they any more likely to heed it when it crosses a coffee table? I have read several surveys of pastoral and psychological counselling. They have all agreed that as much as 80% of counselling is a waste of time and money. People already know what they should do, but they don't want to do it. They keep hoping for an easier, magical way to solve their problems.

Some counselling, of course, is useful and essential, and the church should help people toward the best answer to their need. But in the end, a pastor's job is not to make people *happy*, but *holy*, and to get them safely from sin to salvation and from earth to heaven. The rest is relatively unimportant.

Always, the pastor's main role, as Peter said, should be focussed upon prayer and the ministry of the Word of God, helping the people to understand and to live out the scriptures.

After that, his or her main task is to catch the vision of God for the church and to strive to implement that vision. For us there can be only one definition of success — find what God wants, and do it!

