

Anxious Times: “Church Growth” and Making Disciples

by Wendy Berthelsen

Historically, Americans aren't used to feeling anxious about “church growth;” however in our times, anxiety is common. To respond to this anxiety, I offer three basic points.

- **Don't get stuck in the past!**
- **Some conditions kill kingdom growth.**
- **Making disciples is Jesus' plan for kingdom growth.**

The latter two points are timeless kingdom growth principles from Scripture that are enlivened repeatedly in church history, including my own.

Warning: Don't Get Stuck in the Past

About 50 years ago, America was a church-going culture. If someone did not “go to church,” quite likely they were “shopping” for a church. Thus, church people waited for shoppers to come “in” and when they arrived, they were warmly welcomed, a niche was found for them to participate, and hopefully they became a member. Many particularly in mainline churches labelled this “out”reach.

About twenty-five years ago, already some were beginning to drift away from “church.” At that time, the “attractional” approach to “growth” became common, which asked: “What advertising, website, program, alluring church name, type and location of building, exciting array of activities for all ages could be offered to ‘attract’ those who didn't have a church?” Today, some still are “attracted” by these methods. Note however, both welcoming church shoppers and “attracting” newcomers are not “out”reach; rather, both require people to come “in.”

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Furthermore, if these approaches are overly emphasized, “church” people easily become mere church consumers and spectators while church gatherings easily can adopt a predominately “in”ward focus. Meanwhile, our culture is rapidly becoming wayward, lost and “unchurched,” particularly with younger generations. The unchurched are not waking up on Sunday morning wondering if and where to go to church, nor are they likely to be “attracted” somewhere. **Therefore, churches can no longer be stuck in the past. It's time for real “out”reach,** and to seriously consider what motivates a follower of Jesus to do real “out”reach.

Kingdom Growth Killers!

In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8), Jesus clearly teaches that some conditions kill growth: the path where the seed is consumed by the birds, the rocky ground, and the thorns that choke.

First, the evil one, like the birds on the path, “*steals, kills and destroys*” kingdom growth (John 10:10). Let's not be naïve. The evil one is out to “steal, kill and destroy” you, your faith and Jesus' kingdom agenda. Cunningly and deceptively, the evil one destroys kingdom growth in church gatherings, not only through milder behaviors such as unfriendliness, cliques, commiserating, laziness and blaming, but also through caustic behaviors such as gossip, lying, toxic negativity, sabotage, undermining of leadership, witch-hunting and protecting those who engage these behaviors.

Second, like the rocky ground, hardness of heart caused by sin ruling in a person's life certainly precludes Jesus' living word from taking root, withstanding difficulties and growing.

Third, like thorns, the worries of life and the love of money can “choke” out Jesus, His kingdom Word and growth.

Making Disciples Is Jesus' Plan for Kingdom Growth

The life and teachings of Jesus, The Acts of the Apostles and church history through today all support this relationship between training disciples and kingdom growth.

Near the beginning of Jesus' kingdom ministry, He called ordinary people to be His disciples. Jesus invited them to know Him in a living relationship, forgiving their sins. They also followed Him, learning to imitate Him as His apprentices so that they could be trained to serve and partner with Him, making available His rule, reign, redemption, and resurrection power to every person, place and problem, thus saving and transforming the world.

Jesus has died to forgive your sins. He has risen from the dead, is still alive, and longs to be alive in your entire life. Jesus is still calling and training disciples as His apprentices, including YOU! Hopefully, someone hears Jesus' call to relationship as a child, and begins training as His apprentice with basics (infancy) in the home. Training then continues throughout one's life, leading to maturity, kingdom character and active reproduction: calling and training more disciples. Learning to imitate Jesus as an active disciple is practiced in the midst of "Jesus' body" (not in isolation) ... with other disciples in mutual and healthy relationships of trust, freedom, and accountability.

Therefore, training and equipping disciples is a primary reason the church gathers together. Training as Jesus' disciple is like traveling the continents of the world. It involves six essential dimensions, each representing a different continent. The goal is to travel the entire world, entering into the life of Jesus on each vast continent, attaining competency in all six dimensions. The first dimension is the entry point, and is most necessary and fundamental. From there, the other five continents can be travelled in any order. Each dimension necessarily overlaps and leads to the others. Many and various training approaches may be used within each dimension.

1. Knowing Jesus and the Father: Through Conversion, Reawakening and Continual Repentance

We come to know Jesus through hearing the gospel Word and conversion ... either through baptism when young, or repentance, profession of faith and baptism when older. Conversion and forgiveness of sins is made possible by Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Infant or child baptism presumes ongoing nurture and development. Every disciple also needs continual repentance (transformation) as

prescribed by Scripture (Mark 1:15). Sometimes believers who have come to know and trust Jesus and the Father in the past need to be reawakened because they have fallen asleep (Ezekiel 37) or have drifted away like the prodigal sons (Luke 15:11ff). In addition to testimonials and evangelical preaching, gifted evangelists are needed to plant seeds of faith and bring about conversion, reawakening and continual repentance while offering opportunity to mark these times (like altar calls). Training for practicing continual repentance is also needed.

2. Scripture Becoming the Living, Active Word of God

Jesus taught: "... *humankind should not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God*" (Matthew 4:4). Jesus is still speaking to us through His living active transformative word. The Holy Scriptures are the most complete revelation of God's Word, revealing His salvation history from the beginning of creation to the new creation at the end of time. Often hunger for the word is initially developed through hearing God's promises, and then later through devotional reading. Like bread, disciples hopefully will be fed daily by Jesus' Word in Scripture. Listening and recognizing Jesus' voice in His Word is crucial. Carefully studying and understanding the whole of Scripture is needed so all disciples can faithfully teach and preach.

3. Practicing Disciplines, Especially Prayer

Jesus regularly "practiced" various disciplines, being with His Father and conforming what He said and did to His Father's will (John 8:28-29). Jesus taught that prayer (conversation with God) was evidence of faith (Luke 18:8). Divine love and favor are never earned through practicing disciplines; rather, the Father transforms with His presence and grace when disciplines such as these are practiced: worship, Holy Communion, confession, fasting, lectio divina, silence, Sabbath, simplicity, generosity, tithing and many more.

4. Actively Desiring and Inviting the Holy Spirit

Jesus told His disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit and power, because without the Spirit, kingdom life is impossible (Acts 1:8). God's Word encourages us to "*be continually filled with the Holy Spirit*" (Ephesians 5:18). Continually inviting the Spirit, expecting the supernatural, understanding spiritual gifts, laying on of hands and anointing with oil are practices that equip us with the Spirit's fullness, life and power.

5. Living in Conformity with Jesus' Call (24/7)

Ordinary people hearing and incorporating Jesus' call into all of life is foundational and crucial to being a Christian and the church (Ephesians 4:1). Church in Biblical Greek literally

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means “called out ones.” The Holy Spirit uniquely equips the “called out ones.” with His power and gifts so they can partner with Him in His transformative kingdom purposes in the mission field of life: family, work, “glocal” (local extending to global) and the gathering of believers.

6. *Reproducing: Actively Making Other Disciples*

Reproduction includes loving the stranger and inviting, witnessing and training more disciples. Jesus trained disciples to imitate Him, proclaiming and demonstrating the kingdom like Him. Then, Jesus sent these disciples to make and train more disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). Eventually, all disciples of Jesus should make more disciples, forming relationships of imitation and accountability while using a reproducible training framework.

As disciples of all ages are intentionally trained by Jesus, “travelling” these six dimensions over many years, kingdom fruit “*thirty, sixty and hundredfold*” results (Matthew 13:23). I first observed these six dimensions modeled in my home church. After the leadership persevered, training these dimensions over many years, suddenly our church exploded from a few hundred to several thousand in a few years, “surprising” my pastors. “Surprising?” Yes, because making disciples of Jesus and transforming the world in His name were their goals, not growing an organization labelled “church,” though “church” growth came unexpectedly as a byproduct.

As a minister, I have seen people who once did not know Jesus become people of prayer, develop a vision for their business, city or world mission, become missionaries, pastors, church workers and church planters. I have seen ordinary people transform the apartment buildings where they lived with Jesus’ presence, befriending the lonely, praying for Jesus’ healing, leading people to a living relationship with Jesus and ushering the dying to their heavenly homes. I have seen people who did not know Scripture become people with a burden and compassion for their lost neighbors, the hungry, homeless or imprisoned. The very old and very young have manifested this kingdom growth. As a minister, I have also witnessed numerical church growth where I have served, sometimes not for several years.

As mentioned earlier, **church** literally means **called out ones**. “Ones”—ordinary people “called” by Jesus “out” to transform the world—this is church! Church is you and me, ordinary disciples called by Jesus. Scripturally and funda-

mentally, church is not an organization, building, institution or place. The church’s real goal is to go “out”—to save and transform the world, bringing Jesus’ kingdom to bear on people, places and problems, not to get a bigger crowd “in” a church building.

How then is kingdom growth measured? Growth is evident when the rule, reign, redemption and resurrection power of Jesus is increased in people (person by person by person), places and problems, year by year by year. And when true kingdom growth is evident, these seeds were sown by Jesus who died for your sins, triumphed over every form of sin death evil and the devil, and is still alive—continuing what He began 2,000 years ago: training and partnering with disciples—His body—living and active on earth today.

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