

Understanding Church Purpose and Growth

In this phase if you haven't already done so it might be worth exploring with your church the purpose of 'the church' as well as some of the research on what makes churches grow.

Resource A contains some useful resources for exploring the church's mission. Below you will find a summary of church health and growth research.

Introduction

The following focuses on studies produced by the Church of England and some supporting research in the Australian context. *From Anecdote to Evidence*, a landmark study produced by the Church Growth Research Programme in the UK, forms the basis for these key findings.

Research

From Anecdote to Evidence, Church Growth Research Programme, Church of England

It's important to note that this study focussed on numerical growth (i.e. not 'spiritual' growth). The study demonstrated that:

- There is no single indicator of growth. However, there are a number of common characteristics that are found in many different contexts:
 - Good leadership
 - Clear mission and purpose
 - Willingness to self-reflect and change/adapt
 - Involvement of lay people
 - Intentionality in
 - prioritising growth
 - chosen style of worship
 - nurturing disciples
- There are indicators for decline:
 - Churches with no children or U16's are likely to be in decline.
 - Multi church amalgamations often decline (best practice is one leader for one church community).

Understanding Church Purpose and Growth *(continued)*

○ There are a number of key growth indicators:

1. **Effective leadership** that results in growth is the result of a combination of specific qualities and skills and a drive to grow.
 - Only 13% of respondents prioritised numerical growth (over spiritual growth or social transformation). This choice was significantly correlated with actual growth.
 - Leadership qualities included: motivating, envisioning and innovating.
 - Other factors were:
 - being outgoing with outsiders
 - prioritising growth
 - ability to train others for mission
 - being intentional about worship style
 - having and developing and communicating a vision.
2. **A clear mission/vision:**
 - Of churches that had a clear mission/vision, 64% grew and 25% declined.
 - Of churches that didn't have a clear vision, 26% grew and 52% declined.
3. **A willingness to change and adapt:** researchers found that across the spectrum, churches that were willing to change and adapt to the needs of new people grew.
4. **Lay leadership:** the research showed that good quality lay leadership (that is rotated to give more people the opportunity to serve) is linked with growth. When churches were asked about rotation of lay leadership roles:
 - 8% grew that had the same people in roles.
 - 19% grew that had some rotation.
 - 47% grew that had a lot of rotation.
5. **Active engagement of children and teenagers:** Churches which offered programmes for children and teenagers were 50% more likely to be growing.
6. **Active engagement of people outside of the church:** While not all outreach programmes result in numerical growth (i.e. some result in predominantly social transformation) some programmes providing social services resulted in numerical growth. Positive use of social media was also linked with growth. This may be because it is a sign of young, dynamic leadership.
7. **Good welcoming and follow up of visitors.** Comments from survey participants noted the importance of building on-going relationships with newcomers.
8. **Commitment to nurturing spiritual growth.** Two thirds of churches which offered some form of discipleship courses reported growth.

Understanding Church Purpose and Growth *(continued)*

Churches with a Vision for the Future, NCLS Occasional Paper

Based on the 2011 NCLS data, this paper found that communication of a clear vision for growth resulted in increased church vitality and numerical growth.

"The churches that grew were not those where the leadership simply produced a vision, but where attenders responded well to the vision and adopted it as their own. The vision has been communicated clearly and has been formed in a way that has led to ownership by church attenders."

The Church Growth Research Programme Report on Strands 1 and 2 — Numerical change in church attendance: National, local and individual factors. Voas, David; Watt, Laura. 2014.

- The reason for church decline (in the UK) is the failure to replace older generations of churchgoers.
- Thus it is critical to retain children and youth in the church.
- Context is an important determinant of growth. Rural settings which are generally in decline report a high percentage of attendance (of the local population) and find it difficult to grow. Urban and suburban settings where a lower percentage of the population attends find it easier to grow. This is also attributed to large numbers of immigrants in suburban areas in the UK.
- Churches with a clear willingness to give things a go (i.e. different worship styles, discipleship or outreach programmes) were consistently linked with growth.
- Churches which promoted 'being invitational' to church were more likely to grow.
- Growth and agreement with "Our church has a clear mission and purpose" have a consistently strong correspondence. Roughly two thirds of these churches had little to substantial growth compared to less than a quarter of churches that disagreed with the statement.
- Leadership style has a big influence on growth. Leaders who had strengths in motivating others and having a vision were associated with growth.
- Notably the association between churchmanship and growth is not strong. There is a slight skew towards evangelical, conservative and charismatic churches with the charismatic (as opposed to non-charismatic) being the most significant determinant of growth.
- Of a number of qualities of priests, three (motivating, envisioning and innovating) were strongly correlated with growth.

Understanding Church Purpose and Growth *(continued)*

Synthesis

The research in this field is summed up well by the report From Anecdote to Evidence. This is a synthesis of each of the resources listed above.

- **Leadership:** From the research covered it is clear that strong leadership, both lay and ordained, were strongly correlated to numerical growth. Leaders who were good at casting a strong vision for growth, motivating, and involving laypeople are regularly associated with growth.
- **Vision:** churches which had a strong and well communicated vision for growth are more likely to grow. The NCLS paper makes particular note of the importance of the leader to motivate and equip their church to see the vision as achievable and therefore strive for it.
- **Willingness:** churches need to be willing to self-reflect and change to meet the changing needs of the mission field. What was clear was that change is not always necessary (i.e. 'traditional' worship still appeals to many). However, it is the ability to reflect on practices and evaluate if they can or will achieve a vision for growth that gives purpose to any activity. A greater sense of purpose (no doubt because of a clear vision) leads to increased lay participation which is a positive determinant for growth.
- **Welcoming:** growing churches are welcoming to newcomers (promoting and invitational culture aids this). Such churches strive to quickly build inclusive and lasting relationships with newcomers.
- **Discipleship:** Spiritual growth and numerical growth are correlated, and most likely feed each other i.e. spiritual growth resulting from self-reflection on the mission and purpose of the church can lead to numerical growth which can in turn necessitate the discipleship programs for new and returning believers.
- **Youth:** Retaining youth is critical in church growth. Churches which have programs for children and teenagers were more likely to retain them. One report noted that young clergy are more likely to see growth than older clergy and this increases if the clergyperson has a young family presumably because of an increased focus on ministry to youth.
- **Multicultural outreach:** This was demonstrated to greater effect in Report 001 on leadership qualities. However, it is still important given the large number of immigrants moving to Australia. This is especially the case in suburban and urban churches where there is a greater number of immigrants.
- **For the church to grow it needs leaders who have:**
 - a strong vision for growth
 - the ability to cast that vision to their church
 - the ability to motivate and encourage change/self-reflection
 - the ability to train leaders
 - an emphasis on discipleship
 - an emphasis on evangelism and being invitational/welcoming

Supplementary Resources

Mission Planning: A guide for local churches

Understanding Church Purpose and Growth *(continued)*

Resources

- <http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/FromAnecdoteToEvidence1.0.pdf>
- <https://www.ncls.org.au/research/ncls-occasional-paper-16-01>
- http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/Report_Strands_1_2_rev2.pdf
- <http://community.dur.ac.uk/churchgrowth.research/>

Supplementary Resources

Mission Planning: A guide for local churches