

INTRODUCTION

What New Testament Scriptures do we have to base our belief in CHURCH GROWTH on?

- a) Jesus said – “I will build my church...” (Matt 16:18)
- b) Jesus told this parable – “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed” (Matt 13:31-32)
- c) Jesus talked in world terms – e.g. He was the Light of the World. We are the Light of the World (Matt 4:14)
- d) Jesus prayer in John 17 – “My prayer is...also for those who will believe in me through their message (v 20)
- e) Jesus taught this prayer – “...your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...” (Matt 6:10)
- f) Jesus said – “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20)
- g) Jesus said – “...But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)
- h) Testimony of Acts 2 – from 120 to 3120 in one day (Acts 2:41)

There is a Biblical basis to believe for CHURCH GROWTH.

Remind you – in these lectures on the subject of “church growth”, our focus is on a local group of Christians, growing both quantitatively and qualitatively. C. Peter Wagner in his book “Spreading the Fire” gives the following examples, from the first eight chapters of Acts, of church growth in terms of quantity & quality –

- **Quality in Acts 1** – the believers are in prayer & organising themselves by appointing Matthias as Judas’ replacement.
- **Quantity in Acts 2:1-41** – The Day of Pentecost sees 3,000 come to Christ.
- **Quality in Acts 2:42-47** – The church continues steadfast (firm, fixed, unyielding) & shares their material goods.
- **Quantity in Acts 3:1-4:22** – The lame man is healed & the church grows to 15,000.
- **Quality in Acts 4:23-5:11** – Believers pray & share their material possessions.
- **Quantity in Acts 5:12-42** – Signs & wonders point the way to salvation for many.
- **Quality in Acts 6:1-6** – Reorganisation of the church.
- **Quantity in Acts 6:7** – Many priests are converted.

When we are talking about church growth, we are talking about a group of believers growing in their likeness to Jesus and growing in the mission that Jesus has called them for.

Rick Warren, in his book “The Purpose Driven Church”, says this about the quality & quantity aspects of church growth – “Quality refers to the kind of disciples a church produces. Quantity refers to the number of disciples a church produces.”

GUIDELINES FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

When Jesus spoke about the church he used the word “ekklesia” (see Matt 16:18; 18:17) (“ekklesia in Italian is “chiesa”). This word “ekklesia” has a Hebrew background. In the Greek Septuagint, “ekklesia” translates the OT Hebrew word qahal (the root meaning “to summon”). Together, these words are used to describe Israel as an “assembly” or “congregation” of the people.

Michael Griffiths, in his book “Cinderella with Amnesia”, notes four aspects of God’s summoning of the congregation of Israel. In these four aspects, we shall find some vital truths for church today in the 21st Century. It is important to remember that the experiences of Israel as God’s congregation in the OT were recorded for our instruction & warning today (1 Cor 10:1-11).

As God’s congregation, Israel were -

- a) **CALLED OUT** – see Hosea 11:1. They were called out from Egypt. They experienced release from bondage & underwent a baptism in the Red Sea. This was all a sovereign act of God.
How can we apply this truth to local church today?
- b) **CALLED FOR** – They were called out to have a relationship with God. This was the basis of the covenants established with Abraham & Moses.
How can we apply this truth to local church today?
- c) **CALLED TOGETHER** – Michael Griffiths writes (see reference above) “They were called together to be a special people for God’s own possession” (see Deut 7:6). David Watson in his book, “I Believe in the Church”, writes “Israel’s calling was into a new community, & God called them together.”
How can we apply this truth to local church today?
- d) **CALLED TO** – Israel were called to a future inheritance. For them it was the Promised Land in Canaan.
How can we apply this truth to local church today?

MDP COURSE ITALY – CHURCH GROWTH

Leslie Newbigin – “The church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move – hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all men into one.”

There is another truth about Israel from the O.T. that I want to highlight. It is in regard to the ministry of the Priest & Prophet within the assembly of Israel.

- a) The Priest – God laid down the service of the Priest. Moses was told about what family were to serve as priests; the clothes they were to wear; the duties they were to carry out; their role with the feasts & the “holy” days of Israel; the different offerings & sacrifices that God required. God fixed their role & duties.
- b) The Prophet – their role was essentially hearing from God & bringing instruction, correction, guidance, encouragement, & strategy to both the leaders of the congregation of Israel & the general assembly. This ministry was around hearing from God.

How can we apply the above ministries to the local church today?

THE SPIRITUAL CLIMATE OF ITALY

Let me give you some details about the spiritual climate that exists in Italy. The following figures are based on a 58million population in Italy (see Operation World 21st Century Edition for further details).

- a) The breakdown of the religious climate in Italy (% of total population) –
Christian (including Mormon, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox) – 77% (annual growth –0.4%)
Non-Religious/Other – 20% (annual growth +1.1%)
Muslim – 2.4% (annual growth +2.7%)
Other Religions (including Baha’i, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu) – 0.6% (e.g. Buddhist annual growth +8.4%)
- b) The breakdown of the population along the Christian definition that we are more familiar with –
Protestant (including Evangelical, Pentecostal) – 0.6 % (annual growth +2.7%)
Independent – 0.3% (annual growth +5.6%)
Anglican – 0.02% (annual growth +0.9)
Catholic – 80.3% (annual growth -0.4%)
Marginal (including Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses) – 0.7% (annual growth rate +1.2%)
Orthodox – 0.1% (annual growth rate -1.2%)

I found some figures in regard to the Jehovah Witnesses in Italy. Their annual growth rate is a staggering 7.9% & they have over 3000 congregations in Italy with over 400,000 members/adherents.

- c) Roman Catholicism ceased to be the state religion in 1984, & at least in theory all religions have equal freedom before the law although the religious education in the schools is strictly limited to the teaching of Catholicism.

The following statement is from ECM (European Christian Mission) – “To be Italian is to be Catholic but many don’t want anything to do with spiritual things. How do you reach a nation who are Catholic by birth & deeply sceptical of alternative expressions of the Christian faith? This is the problem posed to those who work in Italy. Catholic traditions & mindset permeate every aspect of national & personal life, but only 5-10% of those professing to be Catholic actually practices their faith. The church has lost millions of adherents to New Age thinking, cults, the occult & materialistic secularism, so that even the Pope has stated that Italy is a mission field.”

- d) Occultism is widespread in Italy. It has been estimated that there are 100,000 consulting magicians in Italy – three times the number of Catholic priests. Satanism is also strong in Italy, with the city of Turin as its centre.
- e) Where are the opportunities for church growth/church planting in Italy -
 - There are more than 35,000 cities, towns & villages in Italy but less than 1,500 have a Gospel witness.
 - The northeast Veneto region, including the cities of Venice, Padova & Vicenza, has a population is nearing 5m but have few evangelical churches. Other regions/cities where a gospel witness is also weak include Milan, Turin, Bologna, Umbria, and Trentino.
 - There are many Catholics who are disillusioned with the Catholic Church. There is an openness with these people to talk about religion without any reserve or inhibition.
 - The number of heroin addicts & the increasing incidence of HIV is another area where a gospel witness is desperately needed.
 - There is little outreach to Muslims & other minorities in Italy e.g. Albanians, immigrants from North Africa.
- f) What weaknesses exist in the Christian Church in Italy–

The statement from ECM, which I mentioned above, also said this – “Religious freedom has been met with indifference...the Protestant witness is weak & divided, with most congregations being small & ineffective.”

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The advance of the Gospel (in Italy) has been hindered by the dearth of mature leaders in churches and, quoting from Operation World, there are some other issues regarding church leadership - “Pastors speak against papal domination in the Catholic Church, but often are papal in authority too. Internal conflicts & scandals due to pride, money & power-seeking have harmed the witness.”

The following quote is from a SWOT analysis on the spiritual climate in Italy that the UK magazine Christianity published a few years ago - “Different denominations are still very wary of each other & it is not unusual for there to be divisions within a particular group. There is a significant lack of well-taught leaders to bring unity & encourage Christians to unify around the key message of the gospel.”

THE PURPOSE AND MISSION OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Johan Lukasse writes in “Churches with Roots” – “God reveals Himself in many ways: in nature, in Jesus Christ, in Holy Scripture. But since Pentecost the church has been the instrument through which He has been active in this world. This universal church becomes visible when local believers join together. God wants to be active through the church. It is His instrument to make His word & plans known to the world...What Europe needs today is a living, powerful, Christ-centred church; churches through which the risen Lord is at work & which He uses as His instrument to make known His plan of redemption.”

TWO QUESTIONS TO ANSWER -

- **What is the purpose of the church?** Acts 2:42-47 gives us the answer to the question. Five activities are mentioned in those scriptures – activities that tell us what we are here for & what we should be about. These scriptures describe our business. The early church, we are told, was –

Devoted to the apostles’ teaching - DISCIPLESHIP

Devoted to fellowship – COMMUNITY

Devoted to prayer, breaking of bread, & meeting together - WORSHIP

Devoted to meeting the needs of others – MINISTRY

Devoted to church growth through conversion – EVANGELISM

The early church was not devoted to keeping a certain tradition going or maintaining a building that honoured somebody from the distant past. The above activities describe what a biblically functioning community looks like.

- **What was the mission of the church?** Matthew 28:18-20 helps us to answer this question. The mission of the church is to reach out to nonbelievers & develop them, along with existing believers, into committed followers of Jesus. This is the mission the purposes of the church are intending to accomplish.

James White in his book “Rethinking the Church” writes – “Think of it in terms of a car assembly line. At the beginning of the line are the raw materials & parts needed to make a car – wire, engine, tyres, and chassis. As those materials move down the assembly line, a car is made, & at the end of the line, it is rolled off for service. In the same way, as people participate in the evangelism, discipleship, ministry, worship, & community of a church, activities that function under the overall mission of the church, they develop into fully devoted followers of Christ who are ready to serve.”

Before moving on to look at Church growth in the Book of Acts, we need to look a little deeper at Acts 2:42-47.

- **Devoted to the apostles’ teaching – DISCIPLESHIP.**
 - This is first thing that Luke says about the church in Jerusalem.
 - Their experience of the Holy Spirit did not mean that they didn’t have to learn.
 - The people were taught what Jesus had taught the apostles who had been with him on this earth.
 - The apostles taught the people – they gave, as Jesus had done with them, systematic instruction.
 - This was done either by someone delivering a straight talk or by holding a discussion with people where all can participate.
- **Devoted to fellowship – COMMUNITY.**
 - They all shared together in their relationship with God the Father, God the Son & God the Holy Spirit. They all shared a common life with God. (see 1 John 1:3)
 - They also shared together. Boice writes in his An Expository Commentary on Acts – “Fellowship with God & true fellowship with others go together.” They were together in a common purpose & friendship. They cared for each other.
- **Devoted to prayer, breaking of bread, & meeting together – WORSHIP.**
 - They met together both in homes & in the Temple area.
 - They celebrated The Breaking of Bread, which was part of a larger meal they had together.
 - They “the” prayers together. There was some formal, laid down prayers it seems e.g. The Lord’s Prayer.
 - They also had informal times together in homes where they joined together in worship.
 - There is evidence that they would have sung together both in the Temple & in homes.

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- **Devoted to meeting the needs of others – MINISTRY**
 - “They gave to anyone as he had needs”.
 - Meeting the needs of others was ministered through sacrifice.
 - This was continuing the OT instruction of caring for the aliens, widows & fatherless – see Deut 26:12.
- **Devoted to church growth through conversion – EVANGELISM**
 - An unnamed army of disciples gossiped the Gospel in Jerusalem.
 - They were not so preoccupied with learning, sharing & worshipping that they forgot about witnessing.
 - The Lord, as He had promised, was clearly & definitely behind the evangelism in Jerusalem.
 - Jesus kept adding converts to the church daily. As the Good Shepherd he was giving the new converts community & family.
 - The witness was in word & in deed.

CHURCH GROWTH IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Presented by Barry Hodgen

1. A Survey of Church Growth in Acts.
2. The Key Priorities of Church Growth in Acts.

(There will be a practical exercise –led by Barry during this session).

A LOCAL CHURCH IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

READ ACTS 11:19-30; 13:1-3

There are a number of local churches in the NT that we could look at e.g. Samaria, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, Jerusalem, Ephesus, Colosse & Rome. Each of these local churches can teach us something about church today. The church in Philippi challenges us to have positive, empowering behaviour towards women within the local church. The church in Berea challenges us about the importance of Bible teaching in the local church &, also, our response to what is taught from the Word of God.

The local church that I have chosen, for no other reason than it is my dream church is Antioch. Please remember – this church was built by Jesus & lived in by the Holy Spirit. This local church was not the invention of man but created & developed by Jesus, as the Head of the Church.

Ken Hemphill writing in his book “The Antioch Effect” says this about church growth –“Church growth is not produced by a program, plan, or marketing strategy. Your church’s greatest need is not a clearer understanding of its demographics, but a clearer understanding of its God. Church growth is not the result of any program or plan. Church growth is the by-product (dictionary meaning - a secondary product but valuable) of a right relationship with the Lord of the church. Church growth is by definition a supernatural activity & thus is accomplished through the church by the Lord Himself. When Jesus founded the church He promised that He Himself would build the church. Paul recounting his ministry in Corinth declared: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth (1 Cor 3; 6).”

We will be looking at how it started & developed into a local church of influence both in the city of Antioch & the surrounding geographical areas of Asia/Palestine.

What about the local church in Antioch?

- The story starts with an unnamed group of disciples coming to Antioch from Jerusalem to escape persecution.
- Further unnamed disciples came to Antioch from other parts of the Mediterranean area e.g. Cyprus, Cyrene.
- These disciples evangelised both Jews & non-Jews in Antioch. The population of Antioch were told “the good news about the Lord Jesus.” (Acts 11:21)
- The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas, to assist this developing group of believers in Antioch.
- Paul was brought to Antioch by Barnabas to help with the Bible teaching in Antioch.
- A church, which knew that “The Lord’s hand was with them” (Acts 11:21).
- The disciples in Antioch were the first to be called “Christians” (Acts 11:26).
- A multinational church with a multinational leadership development in Antioch.
- Antioch developed a ministry diversity that honoured Jesus (Acts 13:1-2).
- The church, started by missionaries, became a missionary church & in doing, fulfilled the great commission of Matthew 28:18-20 & Acts 1:7-8. It was from this church that missionary journeys were launched.
- The church didn’t copy or live in the shadow of the local church in Jerusalem but found God’s way for them as a group of called out people.

What lessons can we learn from the growth & development of this local church that will help us today? (See “The Gift of the Apostle” by David Cannistraci)

a. **Commitment – Acts 11:29**

The believers at Antioch were known as disciples, meaning they were disciplined learners & followers of Jesus Christ. They acknowledged Jesus as Lord & denied themselves, taking up their crosses daily (see Luke 9:23). Many of them left the comforts of their own surroundings to travel & evangelise for the Lord. These disciples were called Christians.

b. **Grace – Acts 11:23**

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When Barnabas was sent to observe the believers' faith, he encountered a strong grace upon all of them. This church was not infected with the legalism that threatened the other churches of the first century. They knew the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, & functioned (dictionary meaning – performance, special work done by a person or a structure) in His life-changing power continually.

c. Benevolence – Acts 11:29-30

When Jerusalem was hit by famine, the believers in Antioch responded by sending relief. Because of their determination to help the brethren who were suffering in Jerusalem, immediately a mass collection was received & given to the apostles to distribute. This act of benevolence is a testimony to the believers' purity of faith & love for God (see James 1:27).

d. Spirituality – Acts 13:1-2

The Holy Spirit was freely moving & speaking in the church at Antioch. The saints there sought God for the direction of the ministry, & the Holy Spirit supernaturally spoke in clear terms. Great power was imparted through the Holy Spirit as men laid their hands on the apostles & sent them out to the ripened harvest field.

e. Diversity – Acts 13:1

Barnabas was a Jew & a Levite. Simeon (called Niger, literally "black") was likely a black man. Lucius, probably a Gentile, was from the African colony of Cyrene. Manaen was from the privileged levels of society, having a close childhood connection with Herod the Tetrarch. Saul was a former Jewish Pharisee who was highly educated, & who grew up in a strongly Gentile environment. Yet all of these men, who were racially & socially different from one another, were counted among the same company of prophets & teachers. There was no segregation or bigotry at Antioch. By all appearances, these varied lives blended beautifully into a ministry team that changed the course of history.

f. Giftedness – Acts 13:1

Certain men in residence at Antioch oversaw significant & recognised ministries. Included were prophets, elders, teachers & disciples. Apostles & evangelists such as Paul & Barnabas were sent out from Antioch. We can safely assume that such a church would have several pastors there as well. Many people were assembled there, each possessing the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

g. Teaching – Acts 11:26; 13:1

By "teaching" we mean that doctrinal instruction was a priority in Antioch. For example, Paul & Barnabas taught the church for a period of one whole year, strengthening the believers in the Word of God. Among the pronounced ministries, other teachers were present & active in the church.

h. Prophetic Ministry – Acts 13:1

Clearly this church at Antioch was a church staffed & led by the prophets. The church at Antioch listened to the prophets who forecasted famine (see 11:27-30), & they listened to the prophets in selecting Paul & Barnabas. Considering all the potential missionaries & missionary activity that could have been initiated, the leaders at Antioch waited for the prophetic directive before they invested their men & money. Once the prophets spoke, however, the church moved accordingly.

i. Worship – Acts 13:2

When the Christians at Antioch gathered, their first activity was to minister to the Lord. The people depicted in Acts 13 appear determined to worship God, allowing the prophetic & evangelistic vision to be birthed in that experience. After all, if we fail in prioritising worship, we cannot hope to possess prophetic power or evangelistic effect.

j. Prayer – Acts 13:2

The people prayed & fasted until they heard from God. Their missionary activity was born in a prayer meeting. Their worship took place in a prayer meeting. The Holy Spirit spoke clearly to them in a prayer meeting. Jesus said the Church He was building would be a house of prayer (see Matt 21:13), & Antioch seems to have been no exception.

k. Structure – Acts 13:2-3

We see the presidency of the Holy Spirit initiating, directing & speaking to a people who followed & understood spiritual authority. Leaders were flowing in major decision-making processes, & no one moved in a disorderly or disrespectful way. Every leader maintained a proper relationship to authority, & the Holy Spirit led them beautifully into unanimous action.

l. Impartation – Acts 13:3

Before Paul & Barnabas were sent forth from Antioch, fasting, prayer & the laying on of hands were employed to impart strength to them. The believers there understood the significance of the laying on of hands, & had something spiritually real to give to the apostles they sent out. Later, Paul would lay his hands on the other world changers such as Timothy (see 2 Tim 1:6); imparting the gift of God he had received from those whose hands were laid on him.

m. Apostolic (missionary) Passion – Acts 13:3

From this single congregation of Christians the most dynamic churches of the ancient world were planted. The life & power of Antioch was not confined to Antioch, but was constantly exported through wave after wave of apostolic teams who would affect their world. Teams were sent, regions were evangelised & churches were established, all because of the vision Antioch possessed for other cities & places.

Another quote from Ken Hemphill (see reference above) – "Church growth occurs when the local church supernaturally & faithfully fulfils the Great Commission in its unique context & with a vision for the world."

MDP COURSE ITALY – CHURCH GROWTH

ANTIOCH – WHAT A CHURCH!

- A church built by Jesus
- A church lived in by the Holy Spirit
- A church where the people were Christians

(Practical exercise – What is a Christian?).

NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last 50 years there has been a lot of thought given to this subject of Church Growth. Along with all the thought & discussions, there has come a whole list of conferences to attend, books to read, real church models to follow, consultants to employ, programmes to adopt, organisations to partner with, marketing strategies to implement & gurus to be devoted too. We cannot cover all the material that has been produced on the subject of Church Growth in the last 50 years. What we will do is just mention one area – Natural Church Development (NCD).

Before we do, let me give you another quote from Ken Hemphill (see reference above) – “...church growth is not something we accomplish for God, but it is a divine activity in which God calls and gifts His children to join Him. We must first recognise that church growth is not something we do; it is the by product (dictionary meaning - a secondary product but valuable) of a right relationship with Jesus, the Lord of the church.”

We will now look further at Natural Church Development.

2. BACKGROUND TO NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

During the 1980s a man by the name of Christian Schwarz began a series of research projects to discover the principles that were behind growing & healthy churches across the world. Questionnaires were sent to churches in 32 countries across the world – churches that were large & small; growing & declining; persecuted & state-subsidised; charismatic & non-charismatic. There were 4.2m responses from both pastors & members of the churches surveyed. From these replies, eight particular principles were found that healthy & growing churches were following.

Please note, these are principles – they do not advocate a particular structure or system for local church. The NCD booklet “Step by Step to the Quality Characteristics” says this about the principles that the research discovered – “The eight principles are valid anywhere & everywhere. They can be transferred into each local situation.”

Since the initial project in the 1980s, Christian Schwarz & his team have continued their research in the field of growing healthy churches. The main result, of all the work since the initial project, has been to confirm the validity of the eight principles that were first identified in the 1980s.

3. THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION OF NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

Philip Walker writes in the booklet “Step by Step to Natural Thinking” – “...the New Testament is full of illustrations linking God’s Kingdom & individual believers to natural thinking.” Jesus used parables on nature, farming & people to teach about His Kingdom. This was what his listeners understood & Jesus was speaking to them in terms that they would understand. When he spoke & taught about growth, he used simple, natural terms that were familiar to his audience. **So the challenge is to start to think about Church Growth in natural terms.**

See Mark 4:26-29 – Jesus compares the Kingdom of God with a farmer scattering seed on the ground. Whatever he did, the growth took place all by itself & the harvest arrived. The farmer had done all he could in the preparation of the soil & the sowing. God did the rest. The farmer could not bring about growth – all he could do was to remove as many obstacles to growth as possible. But God did not bring the growth until the farmer had played his part. The all-by-itself growth was sandwiched between the farmer’s sowing & reaping. Church growth is always a partnership, as we become co-workers with God.

A final quote from Philip Walker – “We cannot take mechanical or scientific models & apply them in totality to the church, for the church is an organism not a machine. We must think in terms of seed, fruit, harvest, & God-given growth.”

4. THE EIGHT QUALITY CHARACTERISTICS OF NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT –

These characteristics are in two parts – we have a subject heading e.g. **Leadership** but we also have a descriptive word e.g. **Empowering Leadership**. All churches will have leadership, in one form or another. The important word in these “quality characteristics” is the descriptive word e.g. **Empowering Leadership**.

a. Empowering Leadership

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The research found that the leaders of the growing churches that were surveyed were not superstars, all-powerful & authoritarian but were there to enable, support, and motivate each person in the local church. Monica Hill writes in “Step by Step to the Quality Characteristics”, “Leaders of growing churches do not try to build up their own power until they are all-powerful – instead more & more they help other Christians to take responsibility in accordance with God’s plans....so that they all become in the end what God had always intended them to be.”

b. Gift-Orientated Ministry

This is a huge challenge for every local church leader – to help each person in the local church to find his or her God-given gift & then find an area of service for the gift to operate in. Monica Hill writes – “When you live in Christ in accordance with your spiritual gifts, you no longer work in your own strength, but the Holy Spirit works in you.” (see reference above)

c. Passionate Spirituality

Monica Hill writes (see reference above) – “The growth of a church depends more on this even than doctrine (although that is important). Passionate spirituality means commitment – the faith being lived with dedication, with fire, with enthusiasm.”

Think – what use is a car engine when the fuel tank is empty!

Jim Cymbala, in his book “Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire” writes, “We are like the church at Laodicea. In fact, we have so institutionalised Laodiceanism that we think lukewarm is normal.”

d. Functional Structures

This is an area that can prove to be controversial in a local church because it may mean changing some of the traditions of the church. Growing churches have structures that support their mission in the local community. People in the natural like the familiar & will hold to things that they are used too. Have you heard someone say, “We have always done things this way.”

Structures in a local church must be useful & serve a specific purpose or they should be adapted, even changed, so that they will support the aims/goals of the local church. But remember also, a new structure today, will be a tradition tomorrow. Structures will have to be continually reviewed & assessed as the church grows.

e. Inspiring Worship Services

Quoting from the “Step by Step” booklet – “Our research showed that we could organise our services for Christians or for non-Christians, we could conduct them using the language of the man-in-the-street, we could adopt an ordered liturgy (or practice/ritual) or use a free form – but, in fact, none of these directly affect church growth. A different criterion does affect it: worship needs to be an inspiring experience.”

f. Holistic Small Groups

Growing churches have a system of small groups where Christians find companionship, support & practical help. Also, they prove invaluable to the spiritual development of Christians. The word “holistic” tells us that these groups all embracing & comprehensive in their effectiveness within a local church.

g. Need-Orientated Evangelism

This feature demands a particular approach to evangelism that is perhaps not how a local church has traditionally carried out evangelism.

Quoting again from the Step-by-Step booklet – “Their (meaning the churches that were surveyed) secret is to start where people are – to discover their needs and to gear their evangelistic efforts to meet those needs. They pass on the Gospel in a way that deals with the questions and needs of people who are far removed from Christian faith – in fact it is made relevant to them.”

h. Loving Relationships

We know what the command of Jesus was about loving each other. The questionnaire that was sent to the growing churches included in the survey asked a whole range of questions which helped to identify how full of love Christians are for one another. Questions that were asked included how much time Christians spend with each other outside church meetings; how generous they are in giving encouragement; how much laughter is there in the church.

Love is like a fragrance in a church – it is attractive, compelling & totally irresistible.

5. CONCLUSION

“Natural church development is an exciting new way of thinking about the church and its mission...” writes Monica Hill.

The above qualities are not so much a model to follow but principles that any church, anywhere can follow. How these principles are applied in a local church is left to the local church. It is good to remember that there is real evidence that these principles have & continue to produce both quantitative & qualitative growth in local churches.

MDP COURSE ITALY – CHURCH GROWTH

The Natural Church Development Group acknowledge that church growth is not easy but feel that each of the above qualities have a Biblical basis & can be development & enhanced as the church grows & matures. These eight quality characteristics are the root of a church; church attendance etc is the fruit. We know that in the natural roots grow & spread out - roots need attending if the plant, above ground, is to continue to flourish & grow. So in the spiritual – each of these quality characteristics need continual review & service for the local church to be what God has called it to be.

Final quote from “Step by Step” – “A distinct correlation (dictionary meaning – mutually related) between the quality of church life & growing churches has been discovered. The eight quality characteristics are the root, while greater church attendance is the fruit. The important question now is – How do we experience growth in those eight stated essential qualities?”

THE QUESTION TO ASK?

In this section I want to highlight some of the discussion & thoughts that have been current in Church Growth thinking in past years.

When a local church is not growing, the question we tend to ask is – What will make our church grow? So, as a result of discussions etc, various programmes, initiatives & ideas will be put forward to get the local church to grow.

Rick Warren (see reference above) writes – “The question we to ask instead is “What is keeping our church from growing?” ...What obstacles & hindrances are preventing growth from happening?”

Let me quote further from Rick Warren – “All living things grow – you don’t have to make them grow. It’s the natural thing for living organisms to do if they are healthy. For example, I don’t have to command my three children to grow. They naturally grow. As long as I remove hindrances such as poor nutrition or an unsafe environment, their growth will be automatic. If my kids don’t grow, something has gone terribly wrong. Lack of growth usually indicates an unhealthy situation, possible a disease. In the same way, since the church is a living organism, it is natural for it to grow if it is healthy. The church is a body, not a business. It is an organism, not an organisation. It is alive. If a church is not growing, it is dying.”

This thinking makes us focus not on CHURCH GROWTH but on CHURCH HEALTH. When local churches are healthy, they will grow the way God has designed. A final quote from Rick Warren – “If your church is genuinely healthy, you won’t have to worry about it growing.”

What diseases & barriers can affect the health of a local congregation?

(Open discussion time with the students)

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

RETHINKING LOCAL CHURCH

In the seventy years prior to 1980, the Swiss dominated the world of watch making. They made the best watches in the world & were committed to constant refinement of the product. It was the Swiss who came forward with the minute hand & the second hand. They led the world in discovering better ways to manufacture the gears, bearings etc of watches. They even led the way in waterproofing techniques & self-winding models. By 1968, the Swiss made 65% of all watches sold in the world & laid claim to as much as 90% of the profits.

By 1980, however, the Swiss had laid off thousands of watchmakers & controlled less than 10% of the world market. Their profit domination dropped to less than 20%. In a single three-year span, fifty thousand of the sixty-two thousand Swiss watchmakers lost their jobs. Why? The Swiss had refused to consider a new development – the Quartz movement – ironically, invented by a Swiss. Because it had no mainspring or knob, it was rejected. It was too much of a paradigm shift for them to embrace. Seiko, on the other hand, accepted it &, along with a few other companies, became the leader in the watch industry.

“The lesson of the Swiss watchmakers is profound. A past that was so secure, so profitable, so dominant was destroyed by an unwillingness to consider the future. It was more than not being able to make predictions – it was an inability to rethink how they did business. Past success had blinded them to the importance of seeing the implications of the changing world & to admit that past accomplishment was no guarantee of future success.” (See Joel Barker “Future Edge” & James White “Rethinking the Church”).

Why should churches in Italy re-think how they do church?

Church growth has been a hot topic in the Western World for many years now. A lot of thinking has taken place around what impact local churches are actually making on their communities. With decreasing church attendance & increasing minimal impact on unchurched generations of people, much has been written in regard to re-examining how we do church & how we be fit for service in the 21st century.

MDP COURSE ITALY – CHURCH GROWTH

Can I suggest some possible reasons why some thought should be given to re-thinking church in Italy -

- Lack of contact with the unchurched.
- Birth Rate is higher than New Birth Rate.
- False idea of Church in the culture.
- Sects are having more success than Church.
- The lack of a Gospel witness in many towns/cities in Italy.

But, can I suggest a spiritual reason? God wants his church to grow. Please remember the story of Acts – the church grew & turned the world upside down.

We mentioned the five purposes of the Church above – how can each one of these purposes be reviewed?

Remind you of a quotation from page 1 of these lecture notes - Rick Warren (see reference above) says this about the quality & quantity aspects of church growth – “Quality refers to the kind of disciples a church produces. Quantity refers to the number of disciples a church produces.”

Questions to ask in regard to quality of disciples being produced?

- Are people being transformed to be like Jesus?
- Are people grounded in the Word of God?
- Are people using their talents & gifts in service & ministry?
- Are people sharing their faith regularly with others?

Questions to ask in regard to the quantity of disciples being produced?

- Are people coming to know Jesus as Lord & Saviour?
- Are these people growing in their knowledge of Jesus Christ?
- Are these people being empowered for service & ministry?

Re-thinking or reviewing how we do church is not about compromising our message or our beliefs. The challenge is to present our message & beliefs in ways & a language which are relevant & meaningful for the community in which the local church is situated. Also, the local church is not here to maintain structures that have been handed down from generation to generation. Often, practices, which have helped a church fulfil its purpose in the past, can be a hindrance to church growth & development in the present & future.

James White writes (see reference above) – “Even though committees, policies, & majority rule are deeply entrenched within the life of the church, it is important to note that none of the terms can be found in the Bible. The research of George Barna has discovered that the most successful churches subscribe to a singular philosophy: “The ministry is not called to fit the church’s structure; the structure exists to further effective ministry.”

RE-THINKING OUR PURPOSES -

- a. **DISCIPLESHIP** – The important question that local leadership should be asking is – what are our people like? James White (see reference above) writes – “After people become Christians, the goal is for them not only to learn how to live like Christ, but actually *live* like Christ.” The Greek word used in the New Testament for disciple simply means “learner.”

Questions that can be asked as this purpose is reviewed –

- What is being taught in the church?
- How is the Christian life presented?
- What relationships are important for discipleship?
- What “learning opportunities” exist in the local church?

- b. **COMMUNITY** – Earlier in this lecture we quoted from Acts 2:42 – “they devoted themselves to the...fellowship.” The word Luke used for fellowship is **the Greek word *koinonia***, which expresses companionship, sharing, & being intimately connected with another person.

Questions that can be asked as this purpose is reviewed –

- What opportunities exist for fellowship within the local church?
- What practical teaching is given on resolving disputes?
- Is there a clear intention in the church to have community?
- What practical things could be done to encourage relationships within the church?

- c. **WORSHIP** – Just a few introductory points on this purpose.

- This word has a meaning beyond the local church services.
- When we think of worship in a church service, we are not just thinking of “the band”.
- The content & form used for a service must be meaningful for the worshippers.
- The goal of any service is the presence of God.

MDP COURSE ITALY – CHURCH GROWTH

- Worship services should include the practices of prayer, the public reading of God's Word, breaking of bread, teaching/preaching & the use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- Our services should have relevance for anyone who attends. Paul wrote to the Corinthian about them worshipping in a way that made little sense to a first time guest (1 Cor 14:23-25)

Questions that can be asked as this purpose is reviewed –

- Is the presence of God experienced in our services?
- For a first time visitor, how would they perceive our worship practices?
- For a non-churched visitor, how would they feel in our worship services?
- Are our services fulfilling a tradition?

d. **MINISTRY** – Let me give you three key truths about ministry in the local church.

- Every Christian is a minister.
- At conversion, every Christian is given at least one spiritual gift that is to be used for ministry.
- We are to operate in the area of our gifts.

(Practical exercise – identifying your gifts).

Questions that can be asked as this purpose is reviewed –

- What specific needs exist within the local church?
- Which of the needs support the mission of the church?
- Do we have a leader for this ministry?
- What spiritual gifts are required for this ministry?

e. **EVANGELISM** – This is a real challenging area for a local church. The proven way of evangelism in a local church is friends/family speaking to friends/family about Jesus. We are all called to be witnesses for Jesus Christ. To support this personal evangelism, the local church could design a programme of events where individual church people can invite their friends & family too.

Questions that can be asked as this purpose is reviewed –

- Are the people trained in personal evangelism?
- Are there local laws prohibiting certain forms of evangelism?
- Are we going to target a particular group of people?
- Does there need to be training in regard to preaching the gospel?
- Is there suitable literature that could be used?
- What is the atmosphere of the church like?

CONCLUSIONS

Rick Warren writes – “Churches grow by the power of God through the skilled effort of people.”

There are two extreme positions that must be avoided in this whole area of church growth-

- **First Extreme Position** – Church growth is all down to organisation, management & programmes. The church is not a business/human enterprise. We must never forget what Jesus said – “I will build my church.”
- **Second Extreme Position** – There is nothing we can do to help a church grow; just sit back & watch God do his work.

Church growth is a partnership between God & man. We only need to read 1 Corinthians 3:6-9 – God did his part after Paul & Apollos did their part.

