



**The Board of Pensions**  
of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

# Growing Healthy Churches

in the Presbyterian  
Church (U.S.A.)



**The Board of Pensions**  
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**Other books in this series:**

- *Report on Clergy Recruitment and Retention to the 216th General Assembly (2004) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*
- *Conversations on Candidacy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*
- *Supporting Mid-Career Pastors of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*
- *Transitions in Ministry of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*
- *Presbyterian Leadership: Reflections on Leadership Renewal in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*
- *Here is the church, Here is the tall steeple, Look inside and ...?*

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## Biography

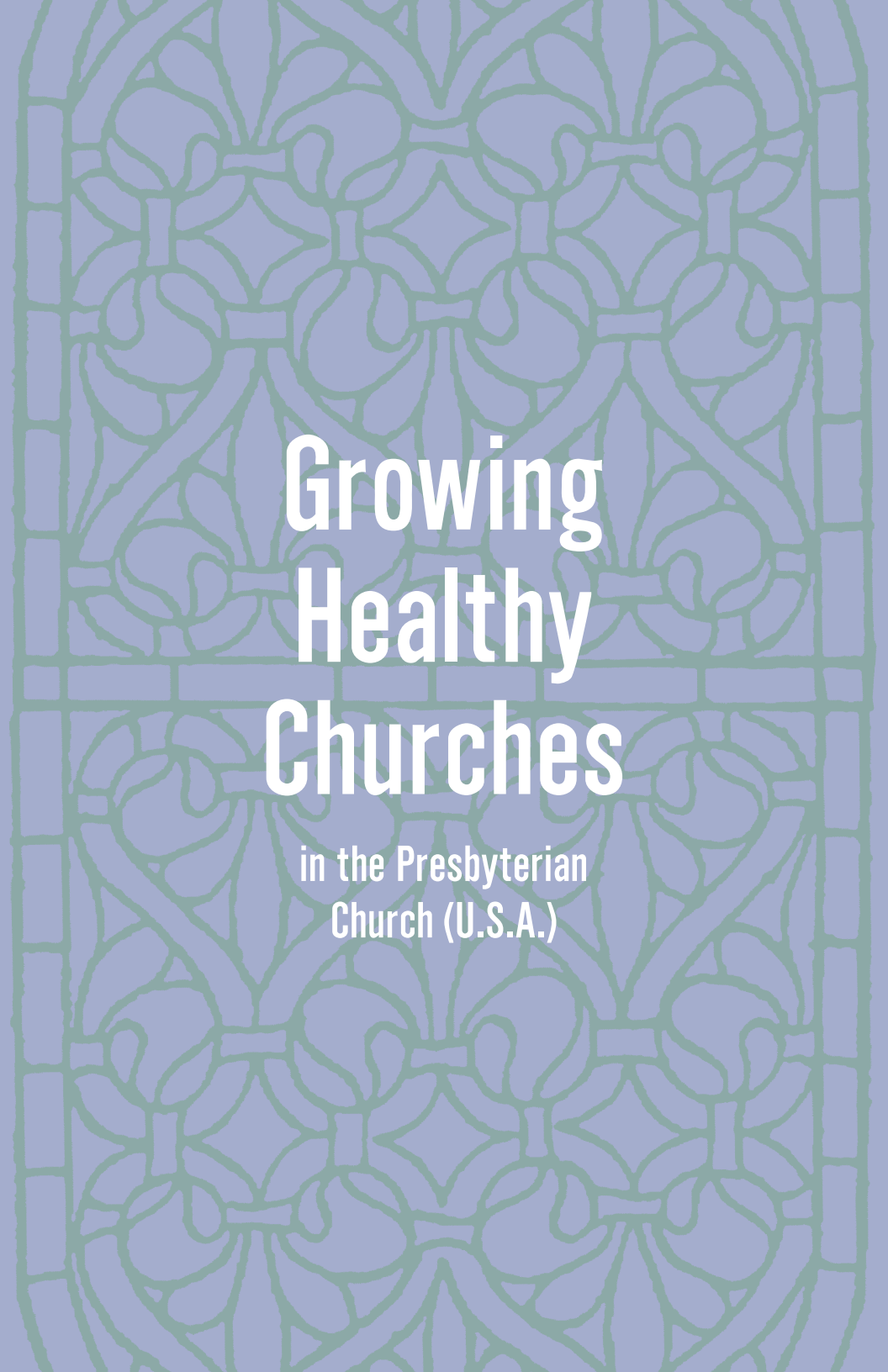
*William Ross Forbes, vice president, church relations & corporate secretary*

Before joining the Board of Pensions in 2003 as vice president for Church Relations and corporate secretary, Bill Forbes served as senior pastor at the Presbyterian Church in Westfield, NJ, from 1989 to 2002. As a minister of the Word and Sacrament, Bill served congregations in Princeton, Atlanta, and Houston, and he was on the General Assembly staffs of the former United Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.

Bill earned a B.A. from Kansas Wesleyan University and an M. Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary. He completed his doctoral studies at the Graduate Theological Foundation in 1988.

Over the course of his ministry, Bill has been active in presbytery and at the General Assembly level. Before joining the Board of Pensions, he was moderator of the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly. Most recently, he moderated the planning committee for the first National Pastor for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Bill and his wife, Patty, have three children and three grandchildren.

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## Foreward

The Regional Benefits Consultations sponsored by the Board of Pensions bring together individuals from the presbyteries and synods of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). At these annual gatherings, information is shared from the management team of the Board of Pensions, dialogue occurs, and a range of topics are discussed to broaden the knowledge of the wide range of programs offered by the Board to meet the needs of members of the Benefits Plan. Presbyteries are able to send four representatives to these consultations. The typical configuration of a presbytery delegation is the executive presbyter, stated clerk, and members of the Committee on Ministry and the Committee on Preparation for ministry.

For the past four years, we have offered a pre-consultation seminar that provides an opportunity for participants to reflect on an important issue facing the church. The 2008 pre-consultation seminar addressed the subject “Growing Healthy Congregations.” Presentations were offered by Eric Hoey, staff for the General Assembly Council; William Ross Forbes and Alexander “Sandy” McLachlan, staff for the Board of Pensions; and Edward Harding, Jr., a consultant to the General Assembly Council. Following the presentations, participants met in small groups to discuss successful models for church growth that they had witnessed in their ministries. All of the presentations and a summary of the small-group work comprise the bulk of this resource.

Evangelism is not the exclusive domain of the pastor, although the pastor should set the tone and model the ways in which members should reach out to others who are not a part of the church community.

Every member is an evangelist. Everyone in the church family should be thinking about ways in which to welcome others into the fellowship of the church. Hospitality and intentionality are at the core of a welcoming and growing faith community. It is time to put the Presbyterian Church and its historic witness in the world back on the map.

- Do visitors receive follow-up phone calls from the pastor or committee members of the church?
- Does your worship bulletin specifically welcome visitors?
- Is there a committee in your congregation specifically charged with new member recruitment?
- Are visitors welcomed within the context of your worship services?
- Are your new member classes “user-friendly”? — i.e., When are the classes offered? Is childcare provided during the classes?
- When entering your church facilities, would a visitor easily know where to go to find the church office, pastor’s study, fellowship hall, etc.?
- Is the membership of the church enthusiastically committed to welcoming new members into its midst?
- If you have a coffee hour on Sunday mornings, are visitors encouraged to attend? Would they know where to go? Do members have an assigned job to look for visitors and shepherd them?

Ask some questions to get your community of faith thinking about growth. Until a congregation becomes committed to the idea of growth, which also means change, it probably will not occur. Everyone in the church — pastors, staff, and members — needs to view growth as a positive and important priority in the life and ministry of the church.

- Visit other churches in your area that are growing. See what you can learn from observing their services and programs.
- Consider having several “Bring a Friend to Church” Sundays throughout the year. Make these dates special times of fellowship, community, and outreach. Evangelism can and must become contagious!
- Consider sending out ZIP code mailings for special service dates — i.e., special music presentations, youth Sundays, special services during Lent and Advent, renewal events for marriages, special speakers, or musical groups, and opportunities for involvement of children.

Evangelism and congregational growth are major issues that have faced every church community since the earliest days of the Christian Church. We do not inherit the Christian faith. Each person must make an individual decision to commit to involvement and participation in a church community. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are but one generation away from extinction if we do not share the faith and welcome newcomers into the Body of Christ.

## Introduction

*Growing Healthy Churches* is the fifth volume in a continuing series produced by the Board of Pensions. Like its predecessor volumes, this resource is dedicated to supporting healthy ministers and ministry across the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The series began with the publication of *Report on Clergy Recruitment and Retention to the 216th General Assembly (2004) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*. The second and third volumes were *Conversations on Candidacy and Supporting Mid-Career Pastors*, respectively. The fourth booklet, *Transitions in Ministry*, focused on those significant moments that occur over the course of every pastor’s vocational journey.

This fifth volume focuses on how the church might “grow.” It is well known that since the beginning of the Christian Era, the Body of Christ has been, and continues to be, but one generation from extinction. We do not inherit the faith. It is only passed on to another generation when one believer tells an individual about the saving grace of Jesus Christ. If someone did not share that story of Good News with us, we would not be a part of the church. Others have said that evangelism is an individual sharing a cup of water to a thirsty seeker. Over the past four decades, the Presbyterian Church has not been particularly successful in telling that “old, old story.” In fact, since the reunion of the UPCUSA and the PCUS in 1983, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has lost 847,680 members and dissolved 1,140 churches. If our church does not begin to take more seriously the need to share the story, the denomination is in danger of becoming extinct.

The Board of Pensions extends deep appreciation to all who participated in the creation of this resource. May it help to celebrate the joy of sharing the faith with others. The story of Jesus Christ can transform lives and institutions. May we be a part of a rebirth of evangelism within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



*The Rev. Dr. William Ross Forbes  
Vice President, Church Relations  
and Corporate Secretary  
The Board of Pensions*



*Robert W. Maggs, Jr.  
President and Chief Executive  
The Board of Pensions*

## Factors That Influence Church Growth

*by Eric Hoey*

When I arrived at the hotel hosting a recent Regional Benefits Consultation, I was given the keycard for my room in a folder that promoted the hotel's Brain Body Fitness program. The folder contained puzzles for the mind and exercises for the body, promoting a whole body workout. Everywhere I went throughout the hotel, I encountered some aspect of the Brain Body Fitness program. Even the coasters for the water glasses served as a venue for puzzles, further emphasizing the hotel's commitment to healthy living.

All that mental exercise led to an epiphany, of sorts.

The Brain Body Fitness program signals a radical shift in marketing. Instead of luring me with comfort, this hotel wanted to change my life! It was challenging me to actively pursue health. Perhaps the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) needs to learn from this marketing approach. The church must make a dramatic paradigm shift, because it is no longer a place where one can go to simply feel comfortable being with other Presbyterians. The church needs to be a place where its members are faithful to the calling of Christ in their lives and ministry. We Presbyterians must become a church that is relevant, offering better spiritual health for those both inside and outside of the church walls.

The first factors that influence church growth are *vision* and *context*. Dear friends, we must replace the memories of yesteryear with God's vision for tomorrow. I am not saying that the memories of yesteryear are wrong; history is an important part of our past, shaping our identity. But the past must not prevent us from becoming relevant for the future. Many churches today are stuck in yesterday's victories. The 1960s grew the denomination; loyal Presbyterians flocked to congregations. Churches were planted with that model, but the model is outdated. We must dream about the ministry of the future.

How does a church capture God's vision for tomorrow? The simple answer is: *Know thy context!* Every church must ask God how to apply its specific ministry to its specific context in order to identify discernment. Every church must understand the context or the unique landscape where God has placed it, and every church must discern the direction God calls them to follow.

In the General Assembly Council's New Church Development team training

## Next Steps: Where Do We Go from Here?

Growing a church is not like following the yellow brick road. There are twists and turns along the way. Take a few precious minutes, log on to Google, and type in "Tips for Church Growth." You will instantly encounter a tsunami of choices: ideas for creative "blogging" that will surely bring in new members, snappy but expensive newsletter and Web site design tips and services, a plethora of books and testimonials about what works, and not a few spoofs about what does not work. After you have perused a few sites, sit back, pocket your credit card, and take time to pray and reflect on what has come to be the paramount challenge of the twenty-first century. You may want to reread the various accounts of The Great Commissioning: Consider Matthew 28:16-20, where Jesus calls on his followers, on us, to make disciples of all people, or refer to Luke, where Jesus tells his disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they become invested with power and then sends them to all the nations. Or contemplate John, who urges Jesus' followers with powerful and simple images to live out the reality of the living presence of Christ. Growing churches means growing disciples, and even biblical accounts acknowledge how challenging it is.

This resource probably will not provide a quick fix for the challenges you face with growing your church, but it has come out of a thoughtful, genuine, and critical concern for the crisis that faces the PC(USA) and many other denominations in the twenty-first century. This resource has been designed for you to share with sessions, evangelism and outreach committees, and all those interested in seeing the Presbyterian Church develop more vital, vigorous congregations. If you are a part of a congregation examining its potential for growth, you may want to initiate a dialogue to respond to the following questions, which could assist you in developing new strategies for church growth or revitalizing existing ones:

- Does your church have a documented strategy for meeting and greeting visitors? Are there individuals who consistently make sure that strategy is followed?
- Do visitors receive any communication from the church after they have visited? Is the follow-up a telephone call, a personal note, or a form letter? Are new members surveyed about how they came to join the church?

## What are the obstacles to growth?

- Resistance to change
- Endemic “low-grade despair”
- “Clubiness” feel to the congregation
- Dysfunctional patterns within the life of the congregation
- Self-absorbed
- Weak pastoral leadership
- No articulated vision
- Poor location
- Too many outdated traditions
- Focused on the past
- No follow-up on visitors
- Lack of energy and enthusiasm in congregational leadership
- Low self-esteem within the congregation
- Costly, outdated facilities
- Too narrow a focus in ministry
- No air conditioning
- Limited parking
- Low salaries for clergy affecting the quality of pastoral leadership
- Negative national publicity
- Culture is becoming less open to religious practice
- Too much clergy turnover
- Conflicts within the church
- Limited financial resources

## Good Stories to Tell???

If you have a good story to tell about your efforts at implementing strategies that helped your congregation to evidence growth or bring about a change in attitude concerning congregational growth and evangelism, we'd like to hear from you. We plan to share these stories of success with others. Please send your stories to:

The Church Relations Team  
The Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
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events, we are standardizing for presbytery teams our process on how to plant a church. Complete with a DVD and study manual, there is now a resource for groups who desire to plant a church. Initially, the team enters a period of discernment that centers on prayer. Personal agendas are put aside, and the heart of God is sought for the direction, context, and location of where to plant a church. Demographic tools help in this process.

*Leadership* and *prayer* comprise the next growth factors. God's own agenda depends on the effectiveness, teamwork, and spirituality of the leadership. Within the session meetings of growing congregations, prayer and reliance upon God are very evident, along with genuine mutual respect and collaboration. Leaders work together passionately for Christ.

In an environment of excellent leadership, leadership teams then grow and flourish. God becomes very real in leadership circles, which in turn transfers to the congregation. One Sunday, I had the opportunity to visit The Highlands Adventure in Paso Robles. The church began as a new church development, and currently meets in a local theater. On my way out, an elderly woman thanked me for visiting, and I asked what kept her at a church with a worship style aimed at 30-year-olds. Her answer went straight to the heart of the matter: “Don't get me wrong, young man, I love my hymns . . . but I go here because I see God at work!”

In churches with healthy leadership teams, prayer becomes an essential, not a supplemental, part of ministry. Groups that pray make God the source of strength, the wise guidance to make decisions, and the place that meets the needs of others. Martha Grace Reese, in her book *Unbinding the Gospel*, says:

After years of talking with pastors and laypeople in churches that are thriving, and in churches that are failing, I am clear that the only way to do ministry successfully, to lead a church or to live a life in today's United States is to pray deeply. We must hand ourselves over to God in clear-headed, accountable, non-naïve prayer. We need to rely as much on God for programmatic guidance as we can stand! Without God vividly in the mix, we drift, life declines.

*Connection*, which includes multiculturalism, is the third factor in church growth. The growth of any congregation means getting beyond the warm and fuzzy feelings of knowing everyone and urging them to meet someone new. I

remember visiting a small church where I was immediately noticed as an “outsider.” Many people walked past me and looked me over as a newcomer, but few took the initiative to meet me. Many people come to churches out of loneliness and a need to connect. Growing churches reach out to meet those in need.

To become a growing congregation, churches must accept the reality of multiculturalism. Are churches going to be relevant to the context in which God has placed them? When neighborhoods change, we often remain isolated, becoming irrelevant to our communities. I once had someone approach me about how

**To become a growing congregation, churches must accept the reality of multiculturalism.**

their church could reach out to the Chinese in their neighborhood and to the Chinese congregation that was using their facilities. She wondered if the church should hold English classes. I suggested that, instead, they needed to hire the best Chinese teacher and have all the leaders learn how to speak

Chinese! This would be a gigantic, positive step for the church to become more relevant to their growing Asian community.

*Risk* and *evangelism* are also factors that affect growth. Church members must release self-preservation and risk self-proclamation. Recently, I reviewed the Church’s calling in G-3.0300. I was struck by the explicit explanation of evangelism:

1. The Church is called to tell the good news of salvation by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ as the only Savior and Lord (G-3.0300a)
2. The Church is called to present the claims of Jesus Christ, leading persons to repentance, acceptance of him as Savior and Lord, and new life as his disciples (G-3.0300b)
3. The Church is called to be Christ’s faithful evangelist (G-3.0300c)

When I read the next paragraph, I was gripped by the call of the Church’s commitment to evangelism:

The Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ. (G-3.0400)

## Small Group Work

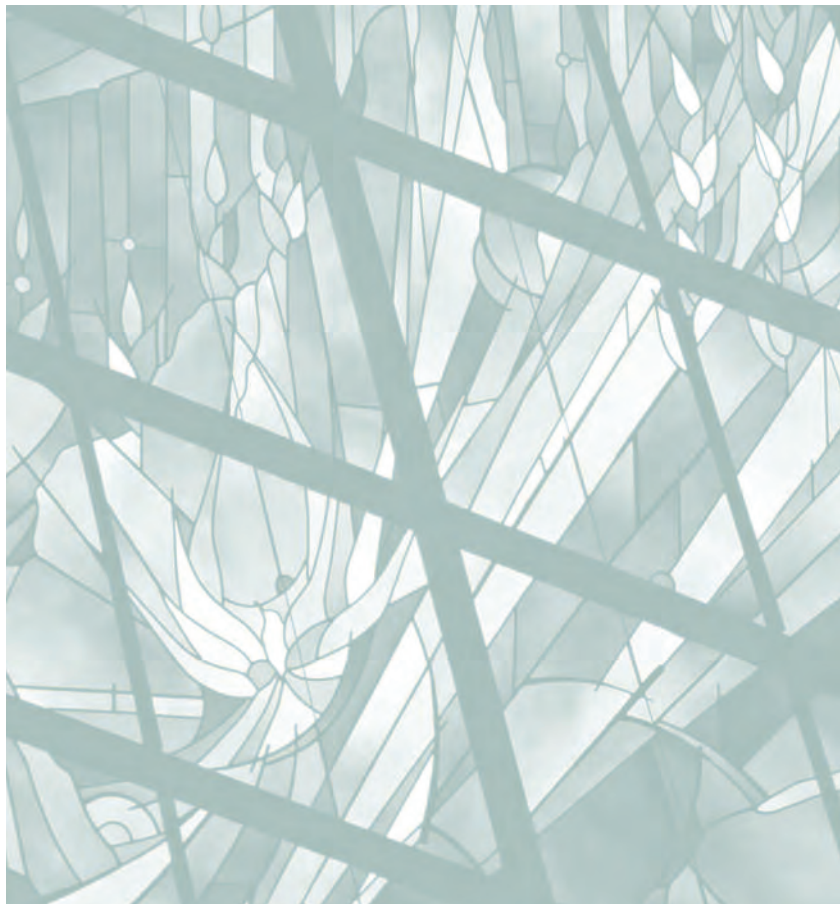
Small groups of six to eight attendees discussed the factors that led to or inhibited congregational growth.

### What are the crucial factors leading to congregational growth?

- Dynamic preaching
- Strong pastoral leadership
- An emphasis on mission
- Vibrant worship
- Programmed activities Monday through Sunday
- Attentiveness to visitors
- Excellent facilities
- Good location
- Small group activities — ways to “connect” with others
- Favorable demographics
- Long pastorates — stable pastoral leadership
- Variety in worship and programming
- Members think “evangelism” and invite visitors
- Presence of children in the congregation
- Strong youth programs
- Quality Christian Education ministry
- Excellent nursery facilities
- Openness to change
- Opportunities for new leadership
- New members are quickly assimilated into existing ministries
- Relevant to the culture
- Coffee hour with opportunities for social connections
- Mission trips
- High quality Web site
- Strong prayer fellowship
- Intentional plan for reaching out to visitors
- Visible pastoral participation in all programmatic activities
- Strong sense of spirituality
- Leadership (lay and clergy) can easily and comfortably articulate their faith

partnership projects in many Central American and African countries represent but the beginning of a long list of projects and the willing expense of many millions of mission dollars to which these churches have committed. Very little (if any) of this mission activity takes place within denominational channels. Many reasons account for this situation, and there is little likelihood that this trend will change.

*Alexander (Sandy) McLachlan serves as special assistant to the president and chief executive of the Board of Pensions. Prior to joining the staff of the Board of Pensions, Sandy served as a parish minister in Texas and Scotland.*



I cannot believe how far we are from this truth! If our church is declining, what do we have to lose by pursuing this important risk of bringing the Good News of Christ to the world?

The Evangelism and Church Growth ministry equip, empower, and inspire individuals, congregations, and governing bodies to share their personal faith in Christ and to become connected to a community of faith. If the church could see this important evangelistic aspect of our faith, we could change the declining landscape of our church and reverse the trend of decline. By embracing this challenge, we may restore the health — and future — of our church.

*Eric Hoey is the director of Evangelism and Church Growth on the staff of the General Assembly Mission Council. Before joining the staff of the G.A.C., he was a parish minister in California.*



## How to Grow a Congregation?

*by Edward Harding, Jr.*

To cultivate a new church is a difficult but achievable goal, one that depends on four key ingredients. These four ingredients — vision, target, leadership, and prayer — are as essential to the new church as sun, soil, and water are to a plant.

At God's prompting, the church begins with one's vision of the future and involves a kind of mental journey. As you embark on this mental journey, take note of the sights, sounds, smells, and images, because you will want to share them with others who must be recruited to the cause. When those who receive your vision combine that description with their own faith, they catch the vision and overcome the first major hurdle of developing a congregation. Visionaries in this process must first include the presbytery. Presbyteries start churches, and they must be in the vanguard of determining where the Spirit of God is moving. In essence, presbyteries ask God to reveal where God is working so that the ministry may join God there! Presbyteries must then determine what God is calling this new church to be and do. However, the question of where God is, is *not* exclusively a question of congregational growth. A great many unchurched persons need to hear the Good News of Jesus, and a church with the right leadership can grow almost anywhere.

Can leadership cast a vision that is clear and easy to apprehend? The presbytery's vision must be clear, because it will be interpreted and subsequently transmitted to the new church's local leadership. A vision that is not clearly written cannot be adequately shared. Remember also, the presbytery calls the first pastor of the new church. The search for a particular skill set and temperament must be consistent with the vision of that church.

Beyond the vision, there must be a target. The new church must identify those whom God is calling the church to reach. *The Purpose-Driven Church* by Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, uses the character Saddleback Sam as a prototype of the church's target. Warren describes Saddleback Sam in such vivid detail that the church is able to design ministries that meet *every* Sam's needs. Ministries that meet people's needs are like a moth to a flame. When the church meets people's needs, it must fight to keep them away! Without such specificity, Saddleback Church or any other new church might cast too wide a net. The new church cannot be "all things to all people."

the entrepreneurial, visionary, "dream big dreams" persona cannot be underestimated. Interestingly, these pastors feel that PC(USA) polity discourages the entrepreneurial pastor.

5. Worship in most of the larger churches includes at least one contemporary-style service. In the East, more emphasis is still placed on traditional worship, but farther west, the prevailing style changes. Some West Coast churches offer a "hard rock" worship service aimed at and reaching those under the age of 30.
6. When worship attendance reaches and exceeds 800, the important milestone of "critical mass" has been reached. Such congregations have the numbers and the budget to introduce a wide variety of programs and to hire the requisite staff. Worship services with different styles and innovative programs can be offered. Additionally, outreach ministries and missions can be staffed and funded.
7. The continuing health of the congregation depends on several factors: a commitment to excellence, a commitment to mission, a competent staff, and freedom to do the job. There is no room for the micromanaging: the head of staff must continue to seek the vision and dream the dream, **and articulate that vision.**
8. Every pastor who was surveyed acknowledged that not everyone in the congregation shares the theology and priorities of the pastor. However, those members must be encouraged to support the work of the church. Folks must know where the pastor and staff stand, but they should not foist those opinions upon the congregation. The key to congregational support is to let them worship God and not the pastor.
9. Some of the denomination's larger churches are in danger of becoming "beached whales." They are endangered because many of their members are unaware of or choose to ignore the changing culture. The assumption is too often, "We are here, so folks will come as they always have, for we are the great Protestant congregation in our community." The day of that reality is long gone. Pastors see the fallacy of this belief, and they are working hard to bring about change. However, the reality is that they may not succeed. Sadly, many congregations today are but a pale shadow of what they were a generation ago.
10. Many churches have undertaken inspiring and innovative missions. Ministries to the homeless, work with children in inner city ghettos, and

## Reflections on the Future

*by Alexander McLachlan*

Statistics tell the story and perhaps predict what the future holds for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). According to the latest Comparative Statistics (2006) issued by Research Services of the PC(USA), we have 447 congregations with 800 members or more, and 7,716 congregations with 200 members or less. There can be no doubt that the PC(USA) is primarily a denomination of small congregations that are getting smaller. In the decade between 1995 and 2005, the PC(USA) lost 13 percent of its membership (among mainline denominations, only the percentage loss in the UCC was greater) compared to an increase of 21 percent in the Assemblies of God.

At the direction of the President and Chief Executive of the Board of Pensions, I have been visiting with a number of pastors from some of our largest congregations, as well as with seminary faculty and retired large-church pastors. Although this project is ongoing, several preliminary observations have emerged:

1. Larger churches are not as large as they used to be. The study of previous volumes of “Comparative Statistics” shows that the membership of these congregations is a little less than it used to be. Many of these congregations appear to have “plateaued.”
2. Most of the larger congregations have been large for a protracted period of time. Some grew in the 1950s under now retired entrepreneurial leaders; most of the others have been large for a much longer period of time. Thus far, my research has uncovered only one PC(USA) new church development congregation that has grown to over 1,500 members and a multi-million dollar budget in the last 20 years.
3. As a denomination, the PC(USA) has done a poor job in New Church Development (NCD). Most NCDs peak at the 300-member mark and cease to grow. There may well be more, but I have only encountered four NCDs begun since the mid-1980s that have shown exponential growth and gone above the 1,000-member threshold.
4. The majority of large-church pastors felt that the personality type of the head of staff was more important than the particular theological perspective in terms of church growth. Their opinions do not imply that personal theological positions are unimportant, but they do suggest that the draw of

Identifying the target is crucial because particular bait attracts certain fish. God calls us to be fishers of men and women, so whom the church “fishes for” dictates the ministry, or “bait,” on the end of the church’s hook. Of course, no fish are ever thrown back! Nevertheless, we target for effectiveness. For example, if a church targets 30- to 40-year-olds, it must identify what is known about that group: They are raising children, so a vibrant youth ministry is a must; they are struggling with spousal relationships, so a marriage ministry is vital. What if retirees are the target? A ministry that includes trips to places of interest or luncheons with speakers on topics of interest, or even activity nights and fellowship would meet their needs.

Training and developing leadership is the next hurdle. Can members be equipped to do ministry? Gift identification is one criterion. Getting the right people in the right jobs is a critical component of leadership. In addition to gift identification, temperament is another consideration in identifying the appropriate ministry. Is there an eagerness to engage in “doing” ministry? If the answer is yes and people are properly equipped, a congregation cannot help but grow. Growth is the mark of a healthy church; anything healthy grows.

Prayer is the final ingredient upon which new church development depends. There are several ways to think about new church development, with the first being the planting analogy. Like garden seeds, the church is planted in a neighborhood through, for example, a Bible Study. The planted seed requires nurture and water until it becomes a full-fledged congregation. Typically spreading through word of mouth, the seed grows. The second analogy relates to a rocket launch to outer space. A disproportionate amount of the rocket’s energy must be expended to leave Earth’s atmosphere. Packaging the organizing pastor, musician, and some sort of administrative support in launching the church’s initial goal to break out of the atmosphere attracts a crowd. Inherent in planting of any kind, especially church planting, is risk. The planter must always be prepared with an alternate plan. Prayer mitigates the risk. Prayer buffers the church against elements that conspire to terminate its growth. Prayers encourage the church in times of difficulty. After the vision is complete . . . the target identified . . . the leadership equipped . . . the church cannot grow unless the people are covered in faith through prayer.

*Edward Harding, Jr. is senior pastor of the Prince George’s Community Presbyterian Church in Springdale, Maryland.*

## Growing a Church Is Not Rocket Science

*by William Ross Forbes*

In many respects, church growth is more complex than rocket science. Or, perhaps we make it so challenging by what we do and what we do not do. As the title of this article suggests, the whole notion of witnessing congregational growth should not be such a complicated matter. Or should it? Is church growth predicated on common sense, or is it the result of an arcane and complex theory that goes beyond our normal understanding?

Almost six years ago, my wife and I set out to find a new church home after my departure from serving churches. After 20 plus years of my serving as a church pastor, we found ourselves sitting in the pew — together — church shopping. Finding a church home was something we had not done in 35 years. After all, I had been a parish minister for most of my career, and the decision about locating a church home was one that had been made for us by my various calls. Since we had decided to remain in the community where my former church was located, we faced a number of somewhat unique challenges. We wanted to find a church close to our home, but we knew we must seek out a faith community that was not in our immediate community. After many years of weekly participation for my wife and daily interactions for me, we were awash in choices and paralyzed by indecision. Initially we struggled with the temptation to sleep in, or to slip in and out of churches anonymously. We soon realized, however, that what we needed and valued was a church family that would enable us to become rooted and involved.

Our pilgrimage began with a sense of adventure and, yes, excitement. This foray into new churches would afford us the opportunity not only to serve, but also to make new friends and to experience an authentic involvement without being in charge. Liberation and anticipation drove us to awaken early Sunday after Sunday as we commenced our search. We visited twelve different churches. Usually, I regret to say, we were greeted indifferently. Various parishioners offered courteous nods or good mornings. Clergy were mixed in their response to us as visitors. Those who knew me generally were friendly, although not overly welcoming; those who did not seemed distracted by the Sunday morning rush, reluctant to enter into anything more than a superficial greeting. I wondered how

church facility became accessible. A number of wheelchair-bound adults and children began to attend services on a regular basis.

Perhaps the most important area for church growth is the treatment of visitors. Does the church have greeters charged to specifically seek out visitors and make them feel welcomed? Some churches ask that all members take on this responsibility. What kind of follow-up takes place? Are cards sent and phone calls made every week? Church growth experts suggest that visitors should be called within 24 hours of a visit, and preferably, that call should come from the pastoral staff. Dr. W. Frank Harrington, the legendary pastor of the Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, called new visitors every week. Sometimes he would make over 100 calls after a busy morning of preaching and teaching. The fact that this became the largest congregation in the denomination speaks for itself. At minimum, a letter or card should be sent to all visitors. The message should be, “We noticed that you were here, we are glad that you came, and we hope you’ll come back.” A personal signature and greeting are keys to making the postcard work, but nothing has more impact than a phone call from a pastor. In an informal survey among prospective new members, not one person cited the postcard as the draw to join.

Becoming a growing congregation is not rocket science; instead, church growth is a matter of organized caring, intentional outreach, common sense, and unconditional Christian hospitality.

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ments, or artwork that both amuses and depresses onlookers? Is signage updated and clear? At one church where I was being considered as a candidate, I remarked that the primary entrance into the facility was from a parking lot into the parish house. The stairway had no signs and poor lighting. A visitor would have utterly no idea where he or she might find a church office, let alone the sanctuary. No one on the search committee thought this was a problem. An uninviting and confusing entrance often deters those who want to come in! My wife and I visited a small, charming looking church one Sunday morning at the appointed hour for worship posted on the Web site. We tried to enter the front door only to find it locked. After searching for a way in, we finally discovered that the time for worship had been changed for this one Sunday to accommodate a children's performance. The door was locked without signage to prevent interruptions! The greeting we received was an audible "ssssssshhhhhh" and the back of the usher. We did not return.

What accommodations does the church make for babies and young children? Parents today are reluctant to drop off their young children at a "tired" church nursery. Is the nursery staff pleasant? Have they been screened and trained? Can parents stay with their young ones in a crying room? Do young families feel welcome and included? Are there clear directions for communication with parents? Are the children safe in the church environment?

Is the church involved in the community? Does the congregation appear to be a "can do" group? The bulletin should indicate participation in the community at large through outreach or mission. The local newspaper should sport articles that regularly advertise classes, music, special services, mission outreach, and descriptions of what goes on and who might participate.

Is the facility accessible and inviting? In one church that I served, I suggested early in my tenure that we make the total facility handicapped-accessible. The session thought this was a good idea. I then suggested a project to demonstrate their commitment. The beautiful chapel was totally inaccessible due to a set of steps. I suggested that a wheelchair lift be installed, at a cost of about \$30,000. Jaws dropped, and one elder argued, "Why should we spend all that money? We don't have anyone in a wheelchair who comes to the early service in the chapel." I gently suggested that the reason might be that our facility was not accessible. The lift eventually was installed, and several years later 95 percent of the whole

often that could have been a picture of me when I was in their shoes. My wife and I made it our practice to participate in the stewardship of every church in order to indicate our intention to be serious participants. Although we left many checks in many offering plates, we received a note of thanks only once, and that one was from a non-Presbyterian church.

We quickly noticed a trend. We would visit, we would try to connect with a pastor or associate pastor, we would rarely receive more than the requisite good morning, and we would leave feeling somewhat baffled. The congregations we visited did not seem to have any obvious program in place to seek out and welcome visitors. Typically, members spent the time before and after worship greeting their own friends and seemed at times almost cool to the interloping couple sitting in a front pew. We felt "left out" at most of the congregations we visited, and we wondered about those who had visited our former churches. Did they too find it daunting to "get in." We finally settled on two different congregations for several months, and in both cases we were never called to participate in any significant ways despite our willingness to serve. After two years as seekers, legitimate, earnest seekers looking for a welcoming community of faith, we did find a new church home. Our current church community is a wonderfully welcoming and caring congregation where we have worshipped for over three years. But I must say, for us at least, finding a church home definitely would qualify as rocket science!

Our personal pilgrimage is hopefully an aberration, a sidebar in the life of the churches we happened to attend. We asked ourselves repeatedly what else we could have and should have done to make the team, to get into the congregational mainstream, to join in the fellowship of a congregation. Should we have offered more support, greeted more people, asked for more help?

Although my research is hardly scientific, I would like to lift up a few traits that I feel serve as hallmarks for any congregation that wishes to be intentional about growth. I should have done this "field study" before I became a pastor myself! First, let me say that I do not believe that the theological orientation of the church and its pastor are crucial factors in church growth. I have seen evidence

**What we needed and valued was a church family that would enable us to become rooted and involved.**

of growing, dynamic congregations that could be described as “liberal” and of others deemed “evangelical” or “conservative.” The key trait is very simple: intentionality, an overt and tangible intention that the congregation truly wants to grow. My observations are not necessarily in any priority. Clearly, the pastoral staff sets the tone for any potential church growth, but the question looms, how do they do this?

At its core, Christianity is based upon unconditional hospitality. Christ’s message to come to Him goes beyond “little children” to include all of us, all of God’s children. The pastor and the pastoral staff set the tone of congregational hospitality. Do the pastors smile? Is body language inviting, warm, engaging, energetic, and enthusiastic? Are worship leaders in a hurry to leave the sanctuary following worship? Do the pastors remember names and faces? Do they recognize new faces and visitors? Does the pastoral staff meet and greet worshippers as they arrive and leave services?

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In addition to the staff, the worship bulletin tells much about the life of the church. Does the bulletin look professional and clear? Are announcements inviting to insiders and to outsiders as well? With the advances in word processing, there is absolutely no excuse for a church not to have attractive publications. From reading the bulletin, is there a sense that many activities are taking place in the

life of this congregation? Is it easy to follow the bulletin? Are visitors openly welcomed and offered “a way in”?

What tone does the pastoral staff offer in leading worship? Worshippers should not be anxious about whether the worship leader knows “where” he or she is going in the service. Confident worship leaders convey a sense of direction and peace in their leadership. This tone tends to create a worship environment that is relaxed and yet filled with anticipation and expectation for worshippers. In the Presbyterian tradition, preaching excellence is expected. A solid sermon feeds souls and attracts and sustains both “the flock” and visitors. A good sermon offers both the challenge and comfort of the gospel. Preparation is part of hospitality. Does the sermon reflect prayerful and wise preparation, or is it haphazard and a

bit too “off the cuff.” A wise pastor gave me some memorable direction at the start of my own vocational pilgrimage as a pastor. He said that in every congregation on any given Sunday there could be individuals who might never have heard the Good News and others who are wiser and more theologically astute than the pastor! An effective sermon speaks to people at a variety of levels. In the busy lives people lead today, they do not need to be held captive to a rambling, wandering preacher (in fact, most won’t return if this characterizes a pastor’s sermons). Every preacher is not a Harry Emerson Fosdick or a William Sloane Coffin or a James Forbes. What a preacher needs to do is to demonstrate an honest wrestling with a text, which gives the congregation something to think about and reflect upon in the week ahead.

Music is obviously a central part of the worship life of every congregation. In recent years there have been great battles over contemporary/praise music versus traditional music and the role each plays in worship. Does music have to be a battleground? Are there winners and losers? Many churches have begun to offer both a contemporary service and a traditional service. Others have gone in one direction or another. Still others attempt to blend contemporary and traditional offerings. My observations would suggest that the *quality* of the music should be the first priority, rather than the style. Well-performed music speaks to the soul of the worshipper and can attract new members. Probably the best bet today is to offer several options for music in worship, creating an environment that honors the traditions of the traditionalists and encourages the participation of those who feel more comfortable with contemporary options. There is no longer one-size-fits-all in terms of music.

Worship is not a “spectator sport” and too many churches have limited opportunities for worshippers to be engaged in the service itself. Litanies, lay leadership in leading the service, participation in announcements, sharing prayer concerns, and greetings are ways that involve worshippers in worship to a greater degree. There is always the concern that worship can begin to be a talent show or an entertainment option. Preparation, practice, and sincere involvement will broaden the participation and ensure the quality of worship.

The condition of the facilities is a telling aspect of congregational priorities and health. When was the last time the sanctuary was painted? Is the parlor decorated with “hand-me-downs” from parishioners, bouquets of dusty silk flower arrange-