

## Conversation #1

# WHY ARE WE NOT GROWING FASTER?

There's no question that church growth is a felt need among church leaders. I meet very few church leaders who hope their church actually declines in the next year. But before you stop at this first conversation, realize the other six conversations in this book are all tied to growth. Unhealthy churches won't grow. Churches that fail to release high-capacity leaders will struggle with growth. Churches that ignore the culture will always struggle. You'll see the pattern if you look.

Because growth is such a big issue, I'll cover a lot of ground in this chapter. We'll look at what to do if your church isn't growing and changes you can make to turn things around. You'll find some thought-provoking questions to discuss with your team and dig deeper. And finally, we'll take a serious look at what it takes to reach the unchurched and how you can be ready to do that. If you and your team want to get serious about growth, I believe these are the conversations you need to have.

### SO THIS SUBJECT MIGHT BE A LITTLE SENSITIVE ...

Before we begin, please realize church growth is a paradoxical subject. Many church leaders dismiss church growth as being less important than discipleship, or are critical of those who they believe are overfocused on attendance. Yet if I showed you the traffic statistics page of the blog I write, you'd also see that by far (and I mean *by far*), the most accessed subject on my blog is church attendance and growth. Literally hundreds of thousands of leaders a year access those posts. It's the subject everyone wants to know about but no one wants to talk honestly about publicly.

Church growth can bring out a beast in some of us. We can overfocus on it. It can also distort our perception of ourselves. When our church is growing, it's easy to think we can do nothing wrong. And when we're not growing, it's easy to feel as if we do nothing right. Neither is healthy.

So why is growth a necessary subject around a leadership table? Because it's related to mission. My focus is not on growth for growth's sake, but for the sake of being effective in our mission and vision of reaching people who need to know the love of Christ in their lives. I'm passionate about church growth because the world is at its best when the church is at its best. I think almost every leader around your table could agree with that. So if the subject becomes emotional or unhealthy, come back to that central point. It's about the mission.

Even with that clarified, let me anticipate some of the other issues you might encounter in your team discussions. Often when church growth surfaces as a subject, some leaders will inevitably ask: "Well, what's wrong with small churches? Why are so many people obsessed with growth?" You might even have a few people go hyperspiritual and start quoting Scripture verses to justify why church growth is a bad thing.

Understand that most of us carry an innate sensitivity about certain subjects. For example, people often say my hair is blond, but I usually say it's red (it's kind of on the border). And for sure, my hair was red when I was a kid. It even came with freckles to boot. As you might appreciate, being redheaded in elementary school meant I got teased. That actually led to a schoolyard fight instigated by me in one of my not-very-awesome moments. At least kids stopped teasing me. Eventually, though,

I grew past my sensitivity. By the time I became an adult, I didn't mind at all saying I had some ginger happening on my scalp.

I've noticed a similar defensiveness on the part of some church leaders when it comes to leading a small church or a church that's stalled out in growth, no matter what size. You might find the conversation gets heated and people start to defend the status quo ("we focus on *quality*, not quantity!"). That's natural ... but don't lose the mission in the midst of it. It's just too important. People need to be reached. The love of Jesus was designed to spill far beyond the walls of the church, not be contained within them.

Finally, don't be cynical about growing churches. That's just too easy. Sure, there are some driven leaders who are passionate about church growth because it makes *them* look good. God knows the hearts of people, and just because some people might want a church to grow because of ego does not mean all growth is bad.

As a rule, I believe that healthy things grow. Throughout the centuries, the mission of the church at its best has always been an outward mission focused on sharing the love Jesus has for the world with the world. That's why growth matters to me (and to so many of you).

## **CHURCH GROWTH IS A MYSTERY ... OR IS IT?**

So how do churches grow? Some people would argue that it's mysterious. Maybe you just pray a lot. Or remain sincere. Or perhaps it's 100 percent up to God to determine which churches grow and which don't, and there's no formula you can use to make growth happen. Case closed.

I get that. And there's some truth in that. God is sovereign. Prayer matters, as does sincerity. And for sure, sometimes the people who lead growing churches are truly mystified as to why their church is growing. They can't give you specific reasons other than grace. On the one hand, that's absolutely true.

And yet, sometimes you and I make life out to be more mysterious than it actually is. For example, you might ask why you keep getting speeding tickets: *Why me, God?! Why?!* Yet the simple truth is, you usually speed. You might ask why your friendships are so conflicted when the reality is, you gossip. You wonder why your kids don't talk to you when, in fact, you were never around when they were young and don't really have much of a relationship with them as a result. Sometimes things aren't as mysterious as we make them out to be.

Take that a step further. Problems whose origins seem mysterious to us are often not that mysterious to others: we say we have a genetic predisposition toward gaining weight, but our coworkers see the fifth donut.

So maybe that's the case for those of us who want our church to reach new people but are puzzled by why that isn't happening. Perhaps it's not as mysterious as we think. There are traceable patterns in stagnant and declining churches as well as in healthy, growing churches. Spotting those patterns can help you spot your strengths and weaknesses. That's what the rest of this chapter is about.

First, we'll look at the patterns present in churches that aren't growing.

## **TEN REASONS YOUR CHURCH ISN'T GROWING (OR GROWING AS QUICKLY AS YOU'D LIKE)**

What follows is a list of ten things that might be holding your church back from realizing the potential of its mission. The points that follow are, frankly, a bit blunt as well as short. But you'll figure out fairly quickly which apply and which don't. While we're often the last to see what so many others see, once someone names it, we're free to deal with it. In fact, among those who take it seriously and act, progress often ensues.

### **1. You're in conflict.**

Ever been in someone's home as a guest only to have your hosts start to argue with each other? It doesn't happen that often, but the few times it's happened when I've been around have made me want to run out the door.

Why would church be any different? If you're constantly bickering and arguing, why would any new people stay? It's not that Christians shouldn't have conflict, but we should be the best in the world at handling it. The New Testament is a virtual manual of conflict resolution, but so many of us prefer gossip, nonconfrontation, and dealing with anyone but the party involved. How conflicted is your church—honestly? As long as you're conflicted, you'll have difficulty growing.

Growing churches handle conflict directly, biblically, humbly, and healthily.

### **2. You're more in love with the past than you are with the future.**

This can be true of churches that are in love with tradition and churches that have had some amazing days recently. When leaders are more in love with the past than they are with the future, the end is near.

Many churches have frozen in their favorite era. Walk into some churches and it feels like 1949, 1970, 1996, or even 2005. The songs are dated, as is the approach. It's as if you've unearthed a time capsule. If your church is a museum of 1950 or even 2012, the likelihood of reaching the next generation diminishes with every passing day.

### **3. You're not that awesome to be around.**

Fake. Judgmental. Hypocritical. Angry. Narrow. Unthinking. Unkind. Those are adjectives often used to describe Christians, and sometimes they have their basis in truth.

Alternatively, we all know certain people who are energizing to be around. You leave feeling better than when you came, simply because you were in their presence. Unfortunately, not enough Christians today fit that description. Jesus was mesmerizing. Paul caused conflict for sure, but he had many deep relationships and incredible influence. The early church was known for compassion and generosity.

If people truly don't want to be around you, don't let the reason be because you haven't let Christ reshape your character or social skills.

### **4. You're focused on yourself.**

Too many churches are focused on their wants, preferences, and perceived needs. They are self-focused organizations filled with self-focused people. It should be no surprise that outsiders never feel welcomed, valued, or included. Sadly, if a person is self-focused, we call him or her selfish. If a church is self-focused, we call it normal.

If you want to reach people, however, you simply can't be self-focused. After all, a life devoted to self ultimately leaves you alone.

### **5. You think culture is the enemy.**

If all you ever are is angry at the culture around you, how are you going to reach people in that culture? Christians who consistently expect non-Christians to act like Christians baffle me. If you treat your unchurched neighbor like an enemy, why would he ever want to be your friend? It is extremely difficult to impact people you don't actually like.

### **6. You're afraid to risk what is for the sake of what might be.**

Let's face it: at least your church has *something* going for it. You're paying the bills. You have more people in your church than the churches around you that have closed. In fact, you can likely point to some programs in your church you might call a success, even if the success is only moderate. Which is exactly why you're struggling with the fear that virtually all of us struggle with: you're afraid to risk what is for the sake of what might be. That only gets worse, by the way, the more successful you become. The greatest enemy of your future success is your current success.

When you're perpetually afraid to risk what is for the sake of what might be, you may as well cue the funeral music now.

### **7. You can't make a decision.**

Governance is a silent killer in today's churches. When your decision making is rooted in complex bureaucracy or congregational approval for every major change, it makes decision making difficult and courageous change almost impossible. Effective churches develop governance that

is nimble;

is aligned around a common mission, vision, and strategy;

trusts staff to accomplish the mission; and

has minimal congregational involvement in decision making.

While that might be a surprise to some church leaders (perhaps even heresy to others), top-heavy, interventionist boards and committees don't scale and won't allow staff leaders to be as agile as they need to be to accomplish what they must accomplish. Your governance might be killing you. And if it takes you five layers of meetings to even decide whether that's the case, you have a very serious problem indeed.

### **8. You talk more than you act.**

Most church leaders love to think and love to debate issues, which is great. Thoughtful leaders do that. But effective leaders add one more component. They *act*.

Most church leaders I know (staff and boards) overthink and underact. If you acted on even a few more of your good ideas, you could possibly be twice as effective in a very short time frame. A B-plus plan brilliantly executed beats an A-plus plan that never gets implemented, every single time.

### **9. You don't think there's anything wrong with your church.**

I still run into a surprising number of leaders and church members who love their church but can't figure out why no one else does. What are other people saying that you're missing? Church leaders who think there's nothing wrong are on their way to soon having not much more to lead than a stalled-

out club for the already convinced.

### **10. You're more focused on growth than you are on God.**

Some leaders get so jacked up about growth that they forget it's about God and his mission. This is a danger every motivated leader needs to keep in mind. We're leading people to Jesus, not to ourselves or to our awesome church. Keeping the focus on Christ ensures that genuine life change happens and lasts.

Okay, so maybe this list stings a bit. Acknowledging the truth isn't easy for anyone. But I think being honest with yourself is the first step toward lasting change. If you're honest about where your church falls within these reasons, you'll be primed to make a meaningful change.

So where do you go next? Here are a few changes you can make.

## **STRUCTURE BIGGER TO GROW BIGGER**

After you've honestly reviewed some of the reasons your church isn't growing or isn't growing quickly, there's still more ground to cover. Some churches begin to grow but simply can't keep up with the growth. The reasons, again, aren't nearly as mysterious as they are structural. In fact, what I talk about in this section in all likelihood applies to about 90 percent of the readers of this book. Why? While most media (social and traditional) are preoccupied with megachurches and multisite churches, the reality is that most churches in North America are quite small. The Barna Group reports that the average Protestant church size in America is 89 adults. Sixty percent of Protestant churches have fewer than 100 adults in attendance. Only 2 percent have more than 1,000 adults attending.<sup>1</sup>

So what gives? Why is it that 90 percent of churches can't sustain growth beyond the 200 attendance mark? I promise you, in many cases it's not:

*desire*—most leaders I know want their church to reach more people.

*a lack of prayer*—many small church leaders are incredibly faithful in prayer.

*love*—some of the people in smaller churches love people as authentically as anyone I know.

*facility*—growth can start in the most unlikely places.

So let's just assume you have a solid mission, theology, and heart to reach people. You know why most churches still don't push past the 200 mark in attendance? It's because they organize, behave, lead, and structure themselves like *small* organizations. And any leader of a larger church knows that. In fact, churches that have passed the 200 barrier have also realized they've had to restructure and reorganize at 400, at 800, at 1,000, and again many times beyond that. Multisite churches even realize that moving to five sites creates far more organizational complexity than it does to move from one to two. If you want to grow bigger, you need to structure bigger.

Take yourself out of the church world for a moment, and you'll realize you recognize this principle intuitively in many areas of life. (For some reason we've come to believe erroneously it

doesn't apply in the church.) For example, all of us know there's a world of difference between how you organize a corner store and how you organize a larger supermarket.

In a corner store, Mom and Pop run everything. Want to talk to the CEO? She's stocking shelves. Want to see the director of marketing? He's at the cash register. Mom and Pop do it all, and they organize their business to stay small. Which is fine if you're Mom and Pop and don't want to grow.

But you can't run a supermarket that way. You organize differently. You govern differently. You hire a produce manager and people who only stock shelves. You employ floor managers, shift managers, a general manager, and so many more. So what's the translation to the church world? What can you do to position yourself for growth? There are six moves you can make that will help.

### **1. Rethink the pastor's role.**

In most small congregations, the pastor is the primary caregiver. Congregations expect it, and seminaries train leaders for it. But it's also what stifles the growth potential of almost every church. Think about it: when the pastor has to visit every sick person, do every wedding and funeral and make regular house calls, attend every meeting, and lead every Bible study or group, he or she becomes incapable of doing almost anything else. Message preparation falls to the side, and providing organizational leadership for the future is almost out of the question.

The pastoral care model of church leadership simply doesn't scale. It's somewhat ironic, actually. If you're a good pastoral care person, people will often love you so much that the church will grow to two hundred people, at which point the pastoral care expectations become crushing. Inevitably, pastoral leaders with larger churches can't keep up and end up disappointing people when they can't get to every event anymore. Additionally, many burn out under the load. The pastoral care model creates many false and unsustainable expectations. Consequently, almost everyone (congregation and leaders) gets hurt in the process.<sup>2</sup>

One answer to this dilemma is to teach people to care for each other in groups.<sup>3</sup> It's a model of care and leadership that goes back to Exodus 18, when Jethro confronted Moses about doing everything himself. Even Jesus adopted it, moving his disciples into groups of seventy, twelve, three, and then one.

In addition to modifying the care model, there's another complicating factor. Many pastors I know are people-pleasers by nature. Not wanting to disappoint people fuels conflict within leaders. So how do you deal with this? Go see a counselor. Get on your knees. Do whatever you need to do to get over the fear of disappointing people. Courageous leadership is like courageous parenting. Don't do what your kids want you to do; do what you believe is best for them in the end. Eventually, many of them will thank you. And the rest? Honestly, they'll probably go to another church that isn't reaching many people either.

### **2. Develop a strategy.**

In addition to a new structure, growing churches develop a carefully thought-out strategy. Many churches today are clear on mission and vision. What most lack is a widely shared and agreed-upon strategy. Your vision and mission answer the *why* and *what* of your organization. Your strategy answers *how*. And don't kid yourself; *how* is critical. Spend time working through your strategy. Be clear on *how* you will accomplish your mission, and don't rest until the mission, vision, and strategy reside in every single volunteer and leader.

### **3. Let leaders lead.**

Many small churches are not led by true leaders. Why? Well, in every church there are people who hold the position of leadership, and then there are people who are truly leaders (who may not hold any position in the church). Maybe they got into a seat of leadership because they've been there a long time or because no one else was willing. But holding a seat of leadership without having the gift of leadership is a strategy for stagnation and dysfunction.

Consequently, one of the transitions every growing church makes involves moving people with the gift of leadership into positions of leadership. Similarly, effective churches will gently but firmly release people from positions of power when they hold titles but aren't advancing the mission.

How do you know who the real leaders are? A few things can help. First, check to see if anyone's following them. Second, look for godly people who have a track record of handling responsibility in other areas of life humbly but capably. Finally, look for people who have created momentum wherever they've gone and who possess wisdom. Then give them the job of leading the church into the future with you. If you actually have leaders leading, it will make a huge difference.

### **4. Empower your volunteers.**

Sure, small churches may not have the budget to hire many staff, but every church has people who are more than capable of serving. Empower them. Volunteers that merely do as they are told out of a sense of duty will never contribute like those who own the vision, mission, and strategy and have been given the authority to lead. Once you have identified true leaders, and once you're clear on your mission, vision, and strategy, you need to release people to accomplish it. Try to do it all yourself, and you will burn out, leave, or simply be ineffective. Empower volunteers around an aligned strategy, and you will likely begin to see progress.

### **5. Stop micromanaging.**

We've already seen that poor governance is a stumbling block to growth. The biggest obstacle in this regard is a board that feels they need to micromanage. If you need permission every time you need to buy paper towels or repaint an office, you have a governance issue. Most boards who micromanage do so because that's all they've ever known. Or because there's a lack of trust. The board of an effective church will guard the mission and vision (holding leaders accountable), empower the team to accomplish the mission and vision, and get out of the way of day-to-day management.<sup>4</sup>

### **6. Simplify your programming.**

Most churches are doing too much, or at least attempting to do too many things. When I began in ministry, as a seminary student, I led three small churches with a grand total of forty-five people in attendance. We had eighteen elders between the three tiny churches. Overall, the church was in evening meetings two to three times a week. We also added numerous bake sales, bazaars, and fund-raising dinners into the mix because the church had little money. Why on earth would a church that small be that busy? Why on earth would we need to meet that often? And why didn't people just tithe? Do you know how many cookies you need to sell to make \$500?

We eventually repurposed most of those meetings to become meetings about vision and reorganization. Then we radically cut down our ministry programming, killing some long-standing programs and replacing them with a few targeted ministries that would help us best accomplish our mission. We also cut down the number of elders. The resulting streamlined ministry gave people a

few well-chosen options rather than a large menu of random programs that led nowhere in particular. Also, the smaller governance structure made for more agile decision making, allowing a more responsive and change-ready approach to leadership. Now, although I lead a much bigger church of one thousand weekly attenders, I'm out only half a dozen nights a month or less (including small group).

Activity does not equal accomplishment. Just because you're busy doesn't mean you're being effective. If you have a lot of programs that accomplish little and lead nowhere, stop them. Yes, people will be mad. Muster the courage to cut some good programs; good is the enemy of great. Then go out and do a few great things. Free up your time so you and your team can accomplish something truly significant.

Structuring bigger to grow bigger is as painful and difficult as it is necessary. But it's also liberating and freeing. Sure, it may be radical. But radical problems demand radical solutions.

### SO THERE'S NO SILVER BULLET?

Somewhere in your team discussion you'll be tempted to believe that this has to be simpler. Maybe you'll try to convince yourself that you really would grow if you only had one or two more things to make your ministry thrive. For example, maybe you've said any combination of these things:

*"We would grow if we ...*

*... got out of our portable location and opened a new building."*

*... got out of our current building and became portable."* (I've actually talked with leaders who think they would grow explosively if they left their old building and became portable.)

*... added new technology (like lights, sound, or video)."*

*... merged with another church."*

*... added a new campus."*

And would you?

Here's my theory: no, you wouldn't. Before you get discouraged, let me explain why this line of thinking rarely, if ever, works. David Ogilvy, the famous 20th century advertising guru, is well known for saying that great marketing just makes a bad product fail faster. That's the principle most of us want to ignore, or at least I do.

Most churches aren't held back because of their venue or even because of their technology. They're stagnant or dying because they're not connecting with people and effectively fulfilling their mission. The trap most leaders fall into is believing that *a change in form will be an adequate substitute for a change in substance*. But a change in form *never* makes up for a change in substance. Substantive change is the only thing that will truly change the trajectory of most churches and organizations.

*A change in venue won't help a dying church grow.*

*Better media won't help a dying church grow.*

*Adding new campuses won't help a dying church grow.*

*Merging won't help two or three dying churches grow.*

I've lived through this tension. In less than two decades, our church has met in a century-old building, an elementary school, a new facility, a movie theater, and once again in a brand-new facility. Through all phases, we've grown from a handful of people to just over one thousand on weekends today. And throughout, buildings, technologies, and even locations have been means to an end, not ends in themselves. They did not *make* us grow or reach new people. They *helped*, but they are not the secret sauce.

## HOW TO MAKE THINGS WORSE

Sometimes leaders can end up making the situation worse without even realizing how it happened. So, in the interest of clarity, if you want to make things worse, here's how to do it: Address form, but don't address substance. Never resolve your underlying problems. Instead, add technology, add locations, add campuses, or engineer a merger, and hope that all this will solve all your problems. It will not.

In fact, it will make them worse. Because now, instead of being in your old building with a manageable budget, you are in a new one with higher costs you can't pay. Instead of having a simple message people can understand, you have all this technology that is creating even greater distance between you and the people you're trying to reach. Instead of being in one location, you are in two, only to discover you now have momentum issues in two locations. Or, if you arrange a merger, you now have two organizations' problems to solve. (This is why church mergers in mainline churches almost never work. Church *takeovers* can and do work, by the way.) I believe these things are true: You can grow a church in a centuries-old building. And you can kill a church in a brandnew, multimillion-dollar facility. You can grow a church with zero media. And you can waste a million dollars on lights, gear, and cameras. You can grow a church in a single site. And you can go bankrupt adding venues no wants to come to. These truths are hard truths, but they're helpful because they make us look in the mirror and get on our knees. They help us realize where the issue really is and make us do the homework and the heartwork we need to do.

Please hear me. I have led church mergers *and* multisite expansions *and* building campaigns *and* a portable church *and* rapid technological change in the church, and they've all *helped* us reach more people and grow our ministry. But I think it's only because we sat down and solved our underlying problems as an organization *first*. As we got healthier inwardly, we grew outwardly. We tackled the issues of substance *before* and as often as possible even as we tackled the issues of form.

And (don't miss this) God has been incredibly gracious to us. (I say that just so you know that I'm not trying to take credit.) And God has been gracious to you, too, I'm sure. It's just that God's grace is no substitute for using your mind and heart to engage the issues of leadership that are before you. For us, the whole journey started with prayer, Scripture, and a burning desire to reach people who were

far from God. Then we figured out a strategy to help us accomplish that. Twenty years into the leadership journey for me, it still starts with prayer, Scripture, and a burning desire.

## **BUT WE'RE STILL NOT GROWING ...**

So what if you've reorganized, strategized, and made substantive changes in your church, but you're still not growing? Almost every church (and almost every organization) faces seasons in which growth stops. Some haven't seen growth in years ... or decades.

One of the best things any leader can do when he or she is in a tough spot is to stop making assumptions and start asking questions. Our assumptions got us to where we are, but they won't necessarily get us where we need to go. I've found four questions in particular are helpful when your church stops growing.

### **1. Is our sense of mission white hot?**

Effective churches have a white hot sense of mission. It's far more than a piece of paper on a wall or something the board recites at annual meetings; it lives daily in the souls of countless people in the congregation. It motivates all the action in the organization. It consumes people.

Often a church that has stopped growing has lost the urgency behind its mission. This is doubly sad in the case of a church because our mission is actually Christ's mission—it's the spreading of the gospel into the world for which Jesus died.

Leaders and congregations that are effective in accomplishing their mission are consumed by their mission. It always burns white hot.

### **2. Has our strategy or approach become dated?**

While the mission of the church is eternal, strategy should shift from generation to generation. Today it needs to shift even more quickly than that. You may have skipped through the strategy section earlier in this chapter and thought, *That's okay ... we have a highly developed strategy.* That may be true. But is your strategy still effective, or is it dated?

Identifying a dated strategy is easy if you're a new leader who has taken over from someone else. It is much harder when you've led in a context for more than five years. The challenge in long-term leadership is that the changes that you introduced may have been novel and effective when you introduced them, but it's not 1995 anymore, or 2005, for that matter.

How do you tell if your strategy is dated? When it stops being effective. Another clue is when you see very few people in the next generation adopting the approach or strategy in question. Tomorrow's leaders tend to gravitate toward tomorrow's solutions. Make sure you understand where the next generation is heading in terms of their strategy. Better yet, get them around your table.

### **3. Are we on top of the constant change in our culture?**

While you're studying your strategy, you might also want to study culture. It's changing, radically and quickly. I believe when historians look back on our generation, they will see it as a crack in history. We now live in a post-Christian, postmodern world. That's true in Canada. It's increasingly true in the United States. In my experience, many of us in church leadership don't really grasp the enormity of the change going on around us. If you want to explore more of this conversation, chapter 6 is dedicated to exploring the changing trends in our culture.

#### **4. Are we focused on unchurched people or on ourselves?**

There's a tendency you and I have as human beings. Our natural drift is to focus on ourselves. Not on Christ. Not on others. The gravitational pull of any church is toward insiders, not outsiders. Left unattended, your church will become a place where the preferences of the members trump passion for the mission. There are two primary ways to address this drift:

In every decision, focus on who you want to reach, not on who you want to keep.

Commit to losing yourself for the sake of finding others.

I completely understand that people automatically respond with, "Well, what about me and my needs (or the needs of our faithful members)?" Jesus said something about finding your life in the process of losing it (Matthew 10:39). People who focus on helping others and honoring Christ soon discover that their needs are met far more deeply than they ever experienced otherwise.

### **NOW YOU'RE READY TO REACH THE UNCHURCHED**

So now that the problems have been diagnosed, what are some signs you're ready to reach unchurched people—ready to throw the doors open? Growing churches have often embraced the following characteristics:

*Your main services engage teenagers.* I've talked with many church leaders who want to reach unchurched people but can't understand why unchurched people don't like their church. They are stumped until I ask them one last question: Do the teens in your church love your services and want to invite their friends? As soon as I asked that question, the leader's expression would inevitably change. He or she would look down at the floor and say no. Here's what I believe: if teens find your main services (yes, the ones you run on Sunday mornings) boring, irrelevant, and disengaging, so will unchurched people. As a rule, if you can design services that engage teenagers, you've designed a church service that engages unchurched people.

*You're good with questions.* This one's still hard for me. I like to think that every question has an answer. I think one of the reasons unchurched people flee churches is that they feel shut down when every question they ask has a snappy or quick answer.

They will find answers, but you need to give them time. Embracing the questions of unchurched people is a form of embracing them.

*You're honest about your struggles.* Unchurched people get suspicious when church leaders and Christians appear to have it "all together." Let's face it: you don't. And they know it. When you are honest about your struggles, it draws unchurched people closer. I make it a point to tell unchurched people that our church isn't perfect, that we will probably let them down, but that one of the marks of a Christian community is that we can deal with our problems face-to-face and honestly, and that I hope we will be able to work it through. There is a strange attraction to that.

*You have easy, obvious, strategic, and helpful steps for new people.* I am a fan of steps, not programs.<sup>5</sup> One sure sign that you are ready to handle an influx of unchurched people is that your

church has a clear, easily accessible pathway to move someone from their first visit right through to integration with existing Christians in small groups or other core ministries. Most churches simply have randomly assembled programs that lead nowhere in particular.

*You've dumped all assumptions.* It's easy to assume that unchurched people "must know" at least the basics of the Christian faith. Lose that thinking. How much do you (really) know about Hinduism or Taoism? That's about how much many unchurched people (really) know about Christianity. Don't fight it. Embrace it. Make it easy for everyone to access what you are talking about whenever you are talking about it.

*Your outreach isn't just a program.* Many Christians think having a "service" for unchurched people or a program designed for unchurched people is enough. It's not. When you behave as if reaching unchurched people can be done through a program or an alternate service, you're building a giant brick wall for unchurched people to walk into. You might as well tell them, "This *program* is for you, but our *church* is for us. Sorry."

*You are flexible and adaptable.* In the future, you will not "arrive." I think the approach to unchurched people and the strategy behind the mission of the church needs to be flexible and adaptable. Don't design a "now we are done" model for reaching unchurched people. You may never be done. Churches that are adaptable and flexible in their strategy (not in their mission or vision) will have the best chance of continually reaching unchurched people. "How quickly can your church change?" will become a defining question of future churches.<sup>6</sup>

### **Three Causes of Decline**

While the causes of church stagnation and decline are complex, they essentially fall into three categories:

1. Internal dysfunction that is sapping the community of its life, such as conflict; wrong people in wrong places; unrealistic expectations of staff, boards, and volunteers.
2. Structural issues, such as boards that micromanage or pastoral care being vested in one or a handful of leaders.
3. An inward focus that refuses to acknowledge the need to change to be effective with outsiders.

Churches that deal with these internal issues will be in a much better position to deal with the subject of chapter 6. It discusses the cultural change happening around us that's making it more difficult for even healthier churches to grow.

## Conversation #1

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Talk About It

1. Has the subject of why churches grow seemed mysterious to you? Why or why not?
2. Of the ten reasons churches don't grow listed on pages 6–10, which (if any) resonate as being true in your context?
3. Is your church restructuring to grow bigger, or is it run more like a “mom-and-pop” operation?
4. To what extent do you think the pastor's role needs to be redefined in your church? How would you redefine it?
5. Has your church or leadership team ever fallen into “silver-bullet” thinking about church growth? How can silver-bullet thinking harm a church team?
6. Is your sense of mission white hot? If so, how have you kept it that way? If not, what would it take to ignite your sense of mission?

### Get Practical

1. What specific structural changes does your team need to make this year to grow bigger? What changes should you make next year?
2. Read through the key points on pages 25–27, “Now You're Ready to Reach the Unchurched.” How many of the seven characteristics listed accurately describe you? Make a list of what needs to change.

### Make It Happen

Identify your single biggest obstacle to growth as a church. Once you've identified it, create a six-month plan to remove it.

In addition, identify two to five other key obstacles to growth. Now design a one- to two-year plan to address each of the obstacles.

Make sure you assign responsibilities and accountability and meet periodically to evaluate progress.