

CHURCH GROWTH AND SOCIAL NETWORKING[©]

by
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It has been claimed that the 21st century church has much in common with the early church. Both minister to a context where ; 1. the government was not Christian, 2. large segments of society were not Christian or nominally Christian, and 3. the church was tolerated rather than embraced. In this environment, the early church produced phenomenal growth. According to the book of Acts, there was 120 believers after Jesus' ascension, 3,000 after Pentecost, 5,000 before the martyrdom of Stephen, and Paul talks about thousands after his missionary journeys. Dr. Rodney Stark, in *THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY*, maintains that by 300 ce church membership was six million believers and over 33 million (1/2 of the population) by 350 ce. (p. 7) This level of growth required a 40% increase in every decade of the first three centuries of the common era. What can we learn from the early church about church growth?

Growing Though Ecclesiology

A key component in the growth of the early church was knowing who it was and why it existed. Using commonly accepted New Testament scriptures, the First Council at Constantinople (381 ce) defined the church as one (united in theology), holy (has a divine mission), catholic (is universal in nature) and apostolic (follows the teachings of the apostles).

Author Anthony Robinson, in the introduction to his book *WHAT'S THEOLOGY GOT TO DO WITH IT?* maintains that church renewal and growth will come through preaching and teaching a solid theology/ecclesiology about who the church is and why it exists. In other words, church growth requires the church to know precisely who it is and why it exists.

Growing Through Social Networking

Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson, in his lecture series *THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY: From the Disciples to the Dawn of the Reformation*, maintains that it is not

theology but social networking that grows the church. (lecture 11) I think Dr. Johnson's statement should be amended as follows: "Initially individuals are attracted to a religious group through social networking. The theology of the church becomes essential as an individual is assimilated into the ministry of the church." Centering on Dr. Johnson's statement, the question is: What networks did the early church use to grow and what networks should the church engage today?

Two principles lie behind a social networking strategy. 1. When more of an individual's family or friends belong to a religious group (network), the odds are that individual will join the group. 2. Up to 86% of those who visit a church for the first time do so because a family member or friend invited them. (statistic from an Alban Institute workshop)

In my reading of church history, I identify five networks used by the church to grow its membership.

1. Family and Friends Biblical texts name family as a key network for the early church. The original 12 disciples had two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, and James and John. Jesus' brothers, James and Jude, became disciples and biblical writers. Mary, the mother of James (Alphaeus) was at the foot of the cross. Barnabas and John Mark were cousins. Timothy was the son of Eunice.

Family and friends are still a prime network for evangelism today. Family members invited to visit a church may be reluctant to attend a worship service where the liturgy is unknown. But, they can be comfortable attending a mid-week program that meets a personal need and does not require prior knowledge of the church, its worship, or its theology.

Congregations would do well to help and train current members to become comfortable with extending invitations to their family and friends to attend a congregation's ministry program. It can accomplish this by, 1. teaching communication skills on how to share the

Gospel without putting others on the defensive, and 2. providing answers to questions commonly asked by those outside the church. A resource for questions and answers is *THE REASON FOR GOD* by Timothy Keller.

2. Artisan Guilds Paul was a tentmaker. He used his occupation to witness to fellow tentmakers and customers. A prime example is Priscilla and Aquilla. Paul meets them in Corinth where they become co-workers. Priscilla and Aquilla accompanied Paul to Ephesus where they became mission developers.

Professional associations, service clubs, and unions are networks for evangelism. As pastors and church members participate in these networks, they continually ask, Who can I invite to visit our church? What ministries in our church will meet the needs of this individual? And, over lunch, they can share how their congregation is making a difference in the local community and around the world.

3 Disenfranchised Perhaps the best known network ministry of the early church is to the disenfranchised; those without political influence and/or economic resources. The vast majority of this network lived in urban areas. Rodney Stark writes that the church ministered to the disenfranchised in the following ways: to homeless and impoverished, the church gave charity; to the newcomer and stranger, it gave a basis of attachment; to widows and orphans, it gave a sense of family; to ethnic strife, it gave solidarity; and to victims of epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, it gave nursing services. (p. 161) In each of these ministries, the church assertively shared the Gospel and invited recipients of ministry to join its fellowship.

Today, the church has been very active in ministering to the disenfranchised. But, the one thing lacking in many of these ministries is inviting the recipient of ministry into other ministries and the fellowship of the church; i.e., building bridges between charity and opportunities to grow in faith and service to others.

The church's networking with the last two groups is often ignored today but they are as important as the first three social networks.

4. Dissatisfied with a religious group Because individuals are dissatisfied with their current religious group does not mean they are anti-faith or even anti-church. Robert Wall, in his commentary on Acts, believes the Diaspora Jews were unhappy following ancient rituals and keeping a kosher house. Therefore, Christianity, with its Jewish roots, was a viable faith sys-

tem for them. Diaspora Jews appreciated an emphasis on morals and ethics over ancient rituals and traditions that were out of place in their time and place.

The equivalent to Diaspora Jews, in my opinion, are the NONES of today. According to Pew Research Center, nones are 19.6% (43 million) of America's population. Thirty-eight percent of nones say they believe in God, 37% say they are spiritual but not religious, 21% pray every day, 34% believe religious institutions bring people together and help their community, 78% say the religious institutions help the poor and needy.

Keeping the above statistics in mind, congregations need to plan ministries that will attract today's nones. How can the church use the nones' professed spirituality to foster and grow a relationship with Jesus?

5. Wealthy and influential We do not often talk about the wealthy and influential in the early church. This topic is unpopular in a church that primarily emphasizes ministry to the poor. But the scriptures are full of wealthy / influential individuals such as the patriarchs, the kings, prophets from priestly families, high-ranking political figures, those from Herod's household, military officers, landowners, householders, etc.

Recognizing the inclusion of the wealthy in the early church raises the question, What ministries does a congregation have to meet the spiritual and psychological needs of this group? Often, needs of the wealthy are hidden inside big houses and a more than comfortable life-style. These needs should be brought into the open and addressed by today's church,

Summary

I believe the church cannot grow without a strong ecclesiology. I know that the first entry into the church is through social networking; i.e., family and friends, work groups, the disenfranchised, those dissatisfied with their current religious affiliation, and the wealthy. So, what are the networks your congregation is using to share the Gospel with those who do not currently believe?

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