

# FIVE GROWTH ATTRIBUTES FOR A COMMUNITY OF FAITH<sup>©</sup>

by  
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Richard Florida, in his book *Who's Your City*, argues that there are forty cities/regions throughout the world that maintain a consistent vitality and growth pattern over a long period of time. These cities/regions dominate the world in terms of population density, creative and innovative thinking, economic productivity, and entertainment opportunities. He identifies five attributes that encourage young professionals, middle-agers, empty-nesters, and retirees to make one of these city/regions their home. These attributes are: 1. Basic services, 2. Aesthetics, 3. Economic and physical security, 4. Community leadership, and 5. Openness to new ideas and experiences. These attributes affect the long-term vitality and growth of a congregation as well. They explain why some congregations thrive while others struggle to stay viable.

## Basic Services

The first attribute of growing cities/regions is that they offer basic services such as excellent schools for families with children living at home; good infrastructure for travel to and from work, good shopping, and attractive recreational facilities such as parks with play areas. There are adequate medical resources; i.e., hospitals, doctors, and long-term health care facilities. In the minds of most individuals, these basic services are a given: they are expected to be there.

The church, as a community of faith, also offers basic services to its members and residents of the community in which the congregation exists. Bill Hybels determined relevant sermons and worship were basic services his congregation must offer if the residents of Barrington, Illinois were to participate in Willow Creek's worship services and mid-week ministries.

Christian Schwarz, in his book *Natural Church Development*, defined 8 "basic services" for a congregation. They are: 1. Empowering leadership, 2. Gift-based ministry, 3. Passionate spirituality, 4. Effective (administrative) structures, 5. Inspiring worship, 6. Holistic small groups, 7. Need-oriented evangelism, and 8. Loving relationships. In Schwarz's list of basic services, it is the adjectives that are important; i.e., every congregation offers worship but not necessarily inspiring worship. In addition, a congregation will only grow to the level of its

weakest service; i.e., if need-oriented evangelism is weak, a congregation experiences little or no growth.

Long-time mainline church members would add to these basic services: 1. chaplaincy care (ministry to those who are hurting spiritually, psychologically, and physically), 2. Christian education for adults and children, and 3. fellowship groups for all generational groups. (These services are a part of Holistic Small Groups and Loving Relationships in Schwarz's list.)

In evaluating their congregation, pastor(s) and lay leaders need to ask, "What are the basic services our members expect from our church?" "What are the basic services new members expect from our congregation?" "What basic services do those who are not part of a church expect from a congregation?" The first question is concerned with ministry to long-time members. The second is concerned with the retention of members. And, the third is concerned with outreach to the community in which a congregation exists.

## Aesthetics

Consciously or subconsciously, individuals evaluate a location's aesthetics by it looks, feel and cultural opportunities. The power of aesthetics is illustrated in Malcolm Gladwell book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference*. Gladwell described how Mayor Rudy Giuliani reduced crime in New York City by "cleaning up" the subway system. He removed graffiti from subway cars and platforms daily. The message, "We will not tolerate a sloppy looking transit system." The new appearance created pride in riders and reduced the number of vandals with spray cans of paint.

Aesthetic beauty carries messages about a congregation. A manicured lawn and flower beds, driveways and parking lots in good repair, a sanctuary without bulletins on the floor the Wednesday after Sunday worship, classrooms with chairs placed neatly around a table, office furniture without dust, to say nothing of painted walls, window blinds in good repair, and clean restrooms communicate respect for God's house and a welcoming atmosphere to all who worship, study, and fellowship in the congregation.

One way to determine the aesthetics of a congregation is to ask one or two new members to take a walk

around the congregation's building. These new members verbalize what they see; i.e., faint lines in the parking lot, chipped stucco around the entrance door, and/or a broken window shade in the nursery. These observations are given to the Property Committee with the expectation that the congregation's aesthetic beauty will be enhanced.

### Security

Security comes in two forms: 1. vocational (economic), and 2. physical safety. Individuals reside where employment in their chosen field is available. Some cities excel for those with financial careers (New York), others have multiple opportunities for political scientists (Washington D.C.), others for petroleum engineers (Houston), and still others for those in entertainment (Los Angeles). Physical safety is in the form of police and fire protection. It includes an adult's comfort level in walking the streets alone at night and parents' feeling secure in sending a 10 year old to the corner store to buy a popsicle.

"Vocational security" in a congregation is the opportunities members have to use their spiritual gifts. For example, if an individual has the spiritual gift of decision making, can that individual participate in the congregation's decision making process or is decision making reserved for a few long-tenured members? Vocational security is being able to contribute your gifts in fulfilling a congregation's purpose and achieving its vision.

Physical safety is present when a congregation has well known core values such as, 1. Every member is a child of God; therefore each member is treated with respect; 2. We do not tolerate racial or gender slurs; or 3. We celebrate and use the spiritual gifts of every member. By stating and enforcing core values, members feel safe in worship, educational experiences, and fellowship opportunities.

It is important for pastors and governing boards to annually evaluate a congregation's core values and determine if they are practiced by the pastoral staff and members. Asking for specific examples of how core values are practiced by the staff and members makes this evaluation process concrete.

### Leadership

In vital and growing cities/regions, leadership exists in two forms; 1. elected leaders such as a mayor, and 2. business leaders who take an active role in community affairs. Both types of leaders have tremendous influence on what happens or does not happen in a city/region.

There are two forms of leadership in a congregation; 1. elected leaders who serve on the governing board and/or standing committees, and 2. unelected leaders (often long-tenured members who may or may not be active in the life of the congregation) who can veto any action of the board they do not like.

Two questions reveal the positive or negative influence leaders have on a congregation. The first question

is, "Are the leaders, elected or unelected, permission givers or permission withholders?" Permission givers support vocational safety while withholders stop members from contributing their spiritual gifts for the advancement of God's kingdom and achieving their congregation's goals.

The second question is, "Do governing board members represent the at-large membership or individual committees and auxiliaries?" Robert Bacher and Michael Cooper-White, in their book *Church Administration* point out that when governing board members represent the at-large membership, they are free to make decisions that benefit the whole congregation. When board members represent particular groups, they often make decisions based on what is best for their constituency.

### Openness

The final attribute for vital cities/regions is openness to new ideas and experiences. While the previous four attributes are very important for the quality of life, openness is the attribute that stimulates creativity and innovation as well as numerical growth. Without openness, cities/regions are stable at best or in decline.

Many congregations have basic services, aesthetic beauty, vocational and physical security, and dedicated leaders but they do not grow. The reason is that they are not open to new ideas and experiences. Their present ministry thinking and portfolio precludes additional and/or different ministries that would attract those not currently worshipping or spiritually growing in the congregation.

Alice Mann, in her book *The In-Between Church* shows the importance of being open to new ideas and experiences. She reports that 80% of congregations that begin a new worship service with a different liturgy and music style than the current worship style experience significant growth. The same can be said for openness in educational offerings, fellowship events, and ministries that reach beyond the congregation's walls.

### Conclusion

For me, the startling insight of Florida's research is the importance openness in a congregation's vitality and growth. A congregation can do everything "right" with the other four attributes, but without openness to new ideas and experiences it will remain stable or decline.

Peter Rudowski is the author of a newly published book,

**CONNECTING THE DOTS:  
Ministering To Your Congregation Through Its  
Organizational System.**

The book may be ordered through Xlibris Publishers  
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