

Why has this growth happened?

How should we feel about it? What should we do next?

Christian Churches Are Growing Churches—So What?

By Dick Alexander

By now, most readers of CHRISTIAN STANDARD have read or heard about the Glenmary Research Center’s study showing that during the last decade the Christian churches/churches of Christ fellowship was the fastest-growing Christian group in America. When the results were published in September, there was a resounding “Wow!” among leaders of our churches. It was gratifying confirmation of what had been suspected for some time—that we have many churches reaching people.

If there was a real surprise, it wasn’t that we were growing. We sensed that intuitively and reported it anecdotally. The surprise was that we are leading the pack.

Why We Have Grown

It’s not difficult to identify some of the reasons for the growth of our churches. Many of the staff leaders, including almost all of the preachers, are graduates of our Bible colleges or seminaries. Those institutions have for decades instilled in their students a passion for evangelism. The “want to” has always been there. In the late 1980s and through the ’90s, growing churches recaptured a “how to” that better engaged the culture.

Erwin McManus, one of the leading American advocates for a culturally-engaged faith, claims the first-century church was more mission driven than theology driven.



Illustration © Grannan Graphic Design Ltd.

That’s also part of our DNA. While some denominations debated theological and social issues, this fellowship was focused on reaching lost people, with results that have now been confirmed.

We also have benefited greatly from being nondenominational. Not only is that ideology far more attractive today than sectarianism, it has contributed to innovation.

Free from the constraints of hierarchy and ingrown denominational programming, churches in this fellowship have attempted new strategies tailored to their communities. Our leaders have attended seminars

and visited effective churches of many Christian groups and brought back “best practices,” without sacrificing biblical convictions.

Another huge factor in growth has been the shift to more contemporary worship styles. The downside of this change has been the disenfranchising of many dedicated, longtime church members unable to adopt foreign music and worship styles. This is painful, but the upside has been reaching unchurched people and bringing them into a vital relationship with God that would never

See “CHURCHES” on page 9

Churches: So What?

Continued from page 4

have happened for most in a more traditional worship setting. Again, our nondenominationalism, with its lack of a prescribed worship form, facilitated innovation and growth.

While the growth of our megachurches has been evident, there also are many churches under 1,000 in attendance that are doing well. And it's been confirmed that this fellowship is a leader in domestic church planting and in sending missionaries overseas.

Simply put, we have much to celebrate!

Dangers We Should Avoid

Are there dangers in our growth? The most obvious land mine is pride. Being the "fastest growing" is heady stuff! It would serve us well to be reminded that the Mormons, whom many consider a cult, grew faster than our fellowship. Islam grew faster, too.

And, while we grew significantly, overall church attendance in the United States declined during the 1990s. It is little solace to say that at least we did better than the others. That's roughly akin to saying we're the leading scorer on a losing team—it may save our egos, but the net result is the same.

The value of the Glenmary study for us is to confirm that some of our churches have found methodology that can be effective in turning around a 50-year slide in American church participation. It offers affirmation and hope.

Beyond that, we would do well to forget the "fastest-growing" label. Comparison is a tool of the devil. And

individual churches that adopt a "sixth-largest" or "second-fastest" label set themselves up for a fall. We should thank God some things are going well, learn from the successes, and then forget rankings and head with urgency to the future.

Issues We Should Consider

As we look ahead, many questions remain:

- Will "growth" be an idol that outweighs all other concerns? Will a higher head count be the only measure of a church, producing breadth without depth and foreshadowing collapse?
- Are we sure we're reaching lost people? To what extent are growing churches just gathering up dissatisfied members from smaller

We should thank God some things are going well, learn from the successes, and then forget rankings and head with urgency to the future.

churches who are looking for a place that does church better?

- Will our Bible colleges and seminaries be able to catch up to the growing churches and provide ministry staff equipped for the future, or will churches continue the trend toward looking elsewhere for staff?

- Will we engage the emerging culture? To what extent are even our growing churches riding the last wave of modernism? Will our large auditoriums become, within a few decades, the equivalent of European cathedrals—relics of a former era of faith? Instead of churches buying

dying shopping malls, within a few decades will businesses be buying empty worship centers? Are even our growing churches on the leading edge or the trailing edge of culture?

- While many churches in the fellowship are growing (some spectacularly), most are not. Will many of those stagnant churches find the faith and the conviction to give whatever it takes to reach lost people?

These are challenging times to be alive—arguably the most exciting since the first century for the people of God. We have tremendous cause for thanksgiving, having seen confirmation in the Glenmary research of what we'd suspected all along, that we have many growing churches. But there could be more. Has there ever been a time that was at once more desperate and more hopeful?

This is a day to applaud innovation. Our churches have figured out some good methodologies, and need to figure out more. Not all that is new is good—some is ill-advised and theologically shallow. But other innovations are Spirit-inspired and life-giving.

We can see what doesn't work; the landscape in America is strewn with failed churches—too many of them in our own fellowship. If we will pursue the leading of the Spirit, the coming decades have the potential to be the best in our fellowship in a century and a half. May His church grow!

Dick Alexander serves as senior minister with Clovernook Christian Church, Cincinnati, Ohio.