

7-1-1999

## What Kind of Church Does God Want to Grow?: Pastoral Concerns about the 21st Century

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### Recommended Citation

Wislon, J. (1999). What Kind of Church Does God Want to Grow?: Pastoral Concerns about the 21st Century. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 10(2), 47-63. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/jascg/vol10/iss2/4>

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**What Kind of Church Does God Want to Grow?:  
Pastoral Concerns about the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Jon Wilson**

*ACTS 2: 42—47: (42)And they continued steadfastly in the Apostle's doctrine, in fellowship and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. (43)Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the Apostles. (44)Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common. (45)And they sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all, as anyone had need. (46)So, continuing daily, with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house. They ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart. (47)Praising God and having favor with all the people, and the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.*

Have you ever been to a really good party—a party where the people were genuinely friendly, and cared for each other with a unique transparency? A place where strangers were greeted with open arms of acceptance? A party where the atmosphere was “contagious,” not unlike a truly wonderful family celebration? It was that kind of atmosphere that attracted me, not to the church, but to Jesus.

I became a Christian through Young Life, a para-church organization. In that family-like, contagious, celebratory atmosphere, I was firmly connected to the “living Jesus” through people who loved Him. These brothers and sisters genuinely cared for me, because of their relationship with Jesus.

Immediately, after experiencing this love, I had a passion for my unbelieving friends. I wanted unbelievers to have the same opportunity to know and experience the unconditional love of Jesus that I had known. I also had a deep desire that God would

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use me to infuse into the church that same “family celebration”, and sense of community, that I had experienced in Young Life.

As time passed, I experienced a clear and profound awareness of God’s call for me into the gospel ministry.

I entered Fuller Seminary in the fall of 1967, where I was soon deeply influenced by Dr. Donald A. McGavran. After Dr. McGavran spoke in chapel one day, I caught him afterwards and asked him a question that would have a long-term impact on my life and future ministry. I asked Dr. McGavran, “What is the best way to learn the principles of church growth?” The passion he had for growing the church was communicated in a simple answer: “The most effective way to clear away the ‘fog’ about what makes a church grow is to . . . study growing churches.”

So my quest began. I began an informal but very intentional study of scores of growing dynamic churches. I then began to pattern my ministry after the common church growth principles that I observed in those models. The obvious common denominator in almost all of these growing New Apostolic Churches was, almost without exception, that they were using principles right out of the New Testament, taking them seriously and prioritizing their church around them.

I immediately began using these biblical principles in ministry. The results, first at Hollywood Presbyterian Church, and later at Lake Avenue Congregational Church in Pasadena were very encouraging.

About this time, Dr. Robert Munger arrived at Fuller Seminary. He was on my list of “Effective Pastors”, and Fuller had brought him to me! I had already taken the Evangelism and Church Growth course, that he had been asked to teach, but I went to Dr. Bob and told him that I wanted to learn more from him. He responded that he was glad I came in because he wanted to learn from me. I was floored. He preceded to ask me, “Since you have had the course, tell me about it; what did Dr. Booth teach in the class?” That semester I became a teacher’s assistant to Dr. Bob in the seminary course on Evangelism and Church Growth. Picking up on my interest in church growth principles, Dr. Bob later asked me to visit certain exciting and growing churches. I was to report back to him, and to his classes at Fuller, the principles that were key to their growth.

Near the end of that first year, Dr. Bob asked me to organize and head up Faith Renewal Teams that would go into churches of all denominations for Spiritual Renewal weekends. These

weekends would start on Friday night and climax on Sunday morning. On Saturday, he and I would meet with church leaders and informally share with them the key principles and possible programs that might work in their church. That final year in seminary for me, and for most of the 30 or so members of that very first Faith Renewal Team, was without a doubt the most fruitful part of our seminary education. The members of the Faith Renewal Teams not only shared these Early Church principles with churches, but, experienced them for ourselves in our weekly team meetings together.

Just as Dr. Bob never stopped growing and learning, I haven't either. For thirty years now, I have been studying effective churches and have continued to revise my list of about twenty key principles. I have continued to observe that, almost without exception, every *growing* church that I have studied has made the majority of these Biblical principles a priority. I have reduced them to five, all of which are observed in Acts 2:37-47.

*What are these key principles?*

Let's look at five words that essentially summarize the twenty or so key principles of growing churches, as found both in the early apostolic church, and in the growing New Apostolic churches of today:

*Conviction, Connect, Celebrate, Commission, Community*

Pastors of growing apostolic churches communicate with:

(1) Conviction. Acts 2:37 "...and when the people heard this they responded... they were 'cut' to the heart." Peter addressed the crowd with a message from the Lord, that was deeply convicting. The words "cut to the heart" indicate that Peter shared the difficult words that God had laid upon his heart, and 3,000 souls were saved that day.

I have also found that growing apostolic churches today are connecting the "cutting edge" of the Word of God to the hearts of people.

Unfortunately, the "cutting edge" of the Word of God has been dulled by compromise in thousands of pulpits in America.

The movie Pleasantville presents the ideal community, and I assumed that that community would include the "ideal church" pastored by the "ideal" pastor. I expected to see a "pleasant pastor . . . picking just pleasant texts, preaching pleasant sermons, about pleasant thoughts, to pleasant people who will leave more

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pleasant than when they came". A Pleasantville pastor never appeared, and I was relieved, because America already has too many real-life passionless preachers.

Has passion in the American pulpit been silenced, so as not to disturb the pews of "Pleasantville Community Church?" Have fearful, people-pleasing pastors succumbed to the comfortable security of their high pulpits, beautiful sanctuaries, and padded pews?

Joe Stowell, in *Shepherding The Church Into The 21st Century*, writes: "I find it interesting that today shepherds often mount their pulpits seemingly intimidated by both the crowd and the culture. It's so much easier to preach in the spirit of pluralism, couching our proclamations in phrases like 'It seems to me' . . . or 'I believe' . . . or 'Wouldn't it be good if' . . . instead simply underscoring the truth with a clear sense of 'Thus saith the Lord', to which the subjects of God will be held accountable."

In his book, *Flying Closer To The Flame*, Chuck Swindoll shares the story of how John Sculley quit his post at PepsiCo to become the president of Apple Computer in 1983. Sculley took a big risk leaving his prestigious position with a well-established firm to join the ranks of an unproven little company that offered no guarantees. Sculley says he made the risky move after Apple CO-founder Steve Jobs goaded him with the question, "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want a chance to change the world?"

We've all heard the story of Alexis De Touqueville; he came from Europe to America to see what it was that gave America its vitality and its strength. He toured all across the country to find the answer.

When he was done, he wrote these impassioned words: "I sought the key to the greatness and the genius of America in her harbors, in her fertile fields, in her boundless forests, in her rich mines, in her world commerce, in her public school system, in her institutions of higher learning. I sought for it in her matchless constitution, but it was not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness that I understood the secret of her genius and her power."

I believe that God's call upon pastors, includes the responsibility to faithfully preach God's word. Therefore, we need to periodically ask ourselves a few questions: "Are we helping to change the world, or are we selling sugared water? Are we "cutting to the heart", or are we putting people to sleep? Are we

preaching with passion and conviction? Are we connecting the hearts of people to God's Word?

That does not necessarily mean that convictional communications is offensive. In *The Isacachar Factor*, Gary McIntosh and Glen Martin correctly point out that the trend in outreach—and I think this is mostly true in the pulpit as well—is away from “hard sell . . . toward soft sell” . . . From “Grab ‘em and Stab ‘em” . . . to “Hug ‘em and Love ‘em.”

Not only have we lost convictional communication, we have somehow been sidetracked from connecting to the hearts of people.

Pastors of growing apostolic churches:

(2) Connect with people. What else does “cut to the heart” in verse 37 mean? I believe it means that Peter also connected with people. He wasn't just saying words; this was not a carefully crafted scripted “pulpit pearl.” Peter connected with people's hearts as he spoke.

My experience as a teenager in the church was not one of being truly connected to the preacher. The preacher was high above the congregation, standing behind a sacred wooden box that had been hand-crafted with all sorts of foreign symbols.

Like others in the pews, I watched the pastor read a manuscript from behind that big box and occasionally peer downward, over his bifocals, at the sinners below, of which I was the chief offender.

That was my model, so when I graduated from Seminary and “ascended” into the pulpit, I too crafted powerful and eloquent sermons to which everyone would say, as they went out the door on Sunday morning, “Great sermon, Pastor.” Naturally, I was pleased.

For years I worked 20 to 30 hours a week on sermons, spending 95% of my preparation time honing a precisely worded manuscript. That manuscript served as my security blanket. I never left home or entered the pulpit without it.

But as I studied the “new communicators”, the pastors of healthy, dynamic, growing, apostolic churches, I came to a new realization. The majority of the preachers of growing churches did *not* use a manuscript and rarely stayed behind the in a pulpit. Why? Either consciously, or unconsciously, they knew how important it was to connect with peoples hearts. They recognized that a manuscript, a robe, and a pulpit can easily become barriers to connecting with people on a heart-to-heart basis.

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As I began to analyze my own training, I came to realize that I had been subtly, taught that if I just said the right words, people would get the message. What really happened was that most of the time I was not really connecting with people.

Dan Seutt, in his book *The Emerging American Church*, writes: "...it isn't normal for believers to sit quietly in pews, as if in school." He said, "For centuries, worshippers actively participated [in worship]... people don't want to just sit there... you can't just lecture to people anymore. That's gone."

My good friend and communications and brain expert, Bert Decker, observed in his excellent book, *You've Got To Be Believed To Be Heard*, that "To reach the new brain—or the thinking part of the brain—our message must filter first through the first brain, or the emotional part of the brain." He also said, "People buy on emotion (first brain) and justify with the facts (new brain)."

I began to realize that my sermons that focused primarily on the "new" brain may have been logical masterpieces, but since they were not invoking the "first" brain, or the emotions of the listener, they were being received as only nice sounding words. The sermons were having little or no life-changing significance.

I also noted that the preachers of growing apostolic churches who I really love to hear preach, move away from the pulpit, walk around, and really connected with people's hearts (the first brain).

George Barna, in his book, *Habits Of Highly Effective Churches* writes that "According to surveys, adults are more than twice as likely to remember the way a preacher delivered his/her sermon as they are to recall the content, the stories, or the personal applications. The critical factor in communication," Barna writes, "is a preaching style that portrays the preacher as open, honest, accessible and empathetic."

It was that connectional aspect that Peter had on the Day of Pentecost. It was not polished oratory, but "Peter's believability", that connected honest words from Peter's heart to the heart of his listeners.

Many in the communication arena, are perhaps totally unaware of this connection factor, just go through the motions, assuming that words written about Jesus on paper will somehow, in some mysterious way, transform people to be more like Jesus.

I don't think this is true anymore, if it ever was. Effective, healthy, growing churches today, and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, will be

led by preachers who are truly connecting with people, perhaps even (especially in smaller churches) interacting with their listeners.

It is convictional messengers that are believable and that truly connect with people's hearts that set the Holy Spirit free to bring transformation in people's lives.

Growing apostolic churches:

(3) Celebrate. Look at verse 46: "They celebrated with unaffected joy." I love that translation. An unaffected joy is a joy that is not tainted by our circumstances and is a direct result of anxiety reducing prayer.

I believe those early church meetings had a distinct celebratory atmosphere. Praise and prayer were key parts of the gatherings of the early believers.

Jesus said, "I have come that you might have my joy within you." When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, he used the analogy of a Jewish wedding feast. Have you ever been to a Jewish wedding feast? Then you know what it's like—it's party time!

Church life in apostolic times seems to have been like a floating party... a cross between a Super Bowl victory celebration and a praise and prayer meeting.

Some say we are right now in the midst of the greatest prayer movement that the world has ever seen.

Growing apostolic churches understand the power of prayer. They intentionally and consistently include both prayer and praise in their worship services. Some churches are hiring ministers of prayer. Some organize prayer teams to pray for their pastors.

Intercessors—those with the special gift to intercede in prayer for others—are being identified, and the awesome power of the Holy Spirit is being released in a new way in this generation.

In his Presidential address as the new president of the American Church Growth Society, Dr. Ray Ellis emphasized that his research found that the majority of healthy churches had healthy climates of prayer.

Church growth expert, Dr. Tom Rainer, says that "70% of church people rated prayer as the highest factor in church growth.

I have come to believe that prayer has much to do with the release of the power of the Holy Spirit, and it is the Spirit of God

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that grows a church. Almost without exception, all the new apostolic churches of which I am aware, have prayer supported worship services that are celebrative, uplifting, and joyful.

One pastor that I personally enjoy is Pastor René Schlaopfer, who now pastors in Santa Cruz, California, but who, some years ago, had a church in South Lake Tahoe.

He told this story one day when I was in worship: He was driving on South Lake Tahoe Blvd. and was wrestling with a problem. He was trying to figure out what to do with all the people who would come to church on Easter Sunday.

As he passed all the casinos on the Nevada side, he prayed. He asked God to give him a sign as to what could be done to accommodate the inevitable Easter Sunday crowd.

Just as he finished his prayer, he looked up, and there in front of him was a sign—a sign from God—Harvey's Casino. So he wrote a letter to Harvey's Casino. He asked, "Could we possibly use your casino for worship on Easter Sunday?" and he signed it, René Schlaopfer, Pastor.

Well, some months went by, and René forgot about the letter. Then one day in December, he was at a Christmas dinner at the church, when an Italian man came up to him. He had never seen this guy before... a big, tall man, with black, slicked back hair, and about five pounds of gold jewelry around his neck.

The man said, "Hello. My name is Pasquale. I've been coming to your church for a few weeks. In fact, four weeks ago, I got saved, and I want you to know, it has changed my life." Then, almost as an afterthought, he said, "By the way, I got your letter."

René thought that maybe he was referring to a "first time visitor" letter, and he said, "Oh, right, we try to make everyone feel welcome."

"Oh, no", Pasquale said, "Not that kind of letter. I got your letter to Harvey's Casino. I'm in charge of the Convention Center, and I think we can work it out."

René was thinking, "Oh, my word, my congregation doesn't even like the fact that I no longer wear a robe, and here we're going to have church in a casino. They'll never go for that." He said, "I'm sure that we couldn't afford it anyway, so let's just forget about it."

Pasquale responded, "That's O.K., don't worry...we got it all worked out and it won't cost you anything."

Now René thought, "If I turn him down, I may end up with

a couple of broken legs here." So he decided to go ahead with it. But now he had to figure out how he was going to tell his congregation. Finally, he decided he would tell them during Sunday service in the announcement segment just before the prayer at the close of the service.

So when the time came, he said, "Oh, by the way...in four weeks, we're going to have our worship services for Easter Sunday at Harvey's Casino. Now let us pray."

Well, he drew all kinds of responses. He got letters that said, "I can't believe you are going to worship in that den of iniquity!" Some of the parishioners threatened to boycott the Easter Sunday service. Obviously, René was a little worried, but he figured it was better than having broken legs, so he decided they would go ahead with it.

Harvey's at that time had a promotional slogan: "The Party's at Harvey's". So the church slogan became, "Jesus Has Risen, and the Party's at Harvey's!"

Easter came, and there was not another soul at the service besides René and Pasquale and the soundman.

René was thinking, "Oh, Lord, what have I done? Christians don't want to go to a casino, and casino people don't want to go to a church. It's like trying to mix water and oil. All my people are going to go to another church on Sunday, and I'm going to lose them all."

About that time, a few people started straggling in. Soon about a hundred people came, then two hundred, then three hundred. When the service started, there were twelve hundred people in that casino. Twelve hundred people that he had never seen before. People who had been attracted to the "Party at Harvey's!"

What he didn't know was that Harvey's had hired a 6'5" juggler to be the Easter Bunny and hand out candy in the casino. The Easter Bunny had asked if he could go to the Easter celebration service.

"Well, you've got a thirty minute break," his boss told him, "You can do whatever you want...but I don't want you to get out of your costume or take your head off because I don't want the kids to see the Easter Bunny without a head. You can go if you want, but you've got to go in your full costume."

So the 6'5" juggler sneaked into the service, and sat in the back row.

At the end of the service, René gave an altar call. He gave

people an opportunity to commit their lives to Jesus Christ. Down the aisle came this enormous Easter Bunny with a big plastic smile on his giant floppy-eared face.

Pastor René was down in front. The Bunny came up, put his hands on René's shoulders, and as he sobbed, blurted out, "Pastor, I feel so empty; I don't know what I'm doing with my life, and I'd like to give my life to Jesus today," And he did.

They had a wonderful prayer time. Many people joined the Easter Bunny in coming to Christ as a result of an invitation to attend the "Resurrection Party for Jesus"

Isn't that why we worship on Sunday, the Day of the Resurrection, instead of on the Sabbath? Aren't we supposed to celebrate the resurrection every Sunday?

My first experience with the institutional church was as a 13-year old boy. I was coerced into going to church and to catechism class.

I remember vividly how the pastor told us that what we were doing on Sunday morning was celebrating the Eucharist. I recall thinking to myself, "That's celebration? Looks more like a funeral to me."

After I became a follower of Jesus, I developed a passion for seeing non-believers experience a true Christian celebration.

Today's growing apostolic churches are "Celebration Communities."

What else will distinguish worship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Thom S. Rainer, in his book, *Giant Awakenings*, writes, "The only fully predictable element of the 21<sup>st</sup> century worship will be its unpredictability." He continues, "Church goers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will continue to have their own preferences in worship styles, but they will no longer consider other styles as deviant or inferior."

I believe that means more choices, especially in larger settings, like the church I attended in Indianapolis this summer. As I entered the church, a sign read, "Traditional worship to the right, contemporary service to the left." Both occurred at the same hour, and both were essentially full. They had a few key elements in common, the exact same scripture was central to both services, and both were Celebrations that would appeal to the unchurched.

The church that thrives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to have to design worship services that are genuine celebrations and understandable to the unchurched person seeking a relationship with God.

Contemporary? Traditional? Blended? The one consistent element that I believe will be seen in all growing apostolic churches will be the element of celebration in worship!

Growing apostolic churches are committed to the great:

(4) Commission. There were 120 people in Acts Chapter 2 intent upon carrying out the Great Commission. They wanted to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. First to Judea, then Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. Those early believers were committed to carrying out the Great Commission. What happened to the early church's great commission army?

Within thirty years after Christ ascended, the Great Commission had motivated Christians to preach the Gospel to the far reaches of the Roman Empire. In fact, for the first 300 years, the Gospel just flowed. It spread fluently and easily, kind of like a giant Pac-Man across the countryside, gobbling up Satan's territory.

In about the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, all of a sudden, the wheels fell off. In the year 313 A.D., Emperor Constantine officially ended the persecution of Christians. The result was what seemed like a great success—Christians would no longer be persecuted.

This seemed like a giant step forward for Christianity. ("Wow! We won! Let's take over!"). Instead, what seemed like success turned into a disaster—the "disastrous success" of 313 A.D. What happened? The church became divided between clergy and laity. The clergy took the pulpit; the laity took the pews.

As Kierkegaard once said, "It became 'professional pulpitism' financed by lay spectators." And spectators are not at all what pastors needed! James Rutz writes, "Thousands of competent ministers have seen their careers crash because they were blamed for the chronic inertia of a flock of wing-clipped birds, forbidden to fly."

Perhaps the biggest challenge and opportunity facing most pastors today is to turn an audience into an army, to turn reluctant wing-clipped pew sitters into active ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Richard Halverson was pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Bethesda, MD, and later became the Chaplain of the Senate. He wrote a book called, *How I Changed My Thinking About the Church*.

One day, 30 years ago, I called him up and said, "Dr. Halverson, you have a wonderful reputation as having a very effec-

tive ministry. I'm looking for models for ministry today that are based on the New Testament model. Could I come back to Washington D.C. and learn from you?"

He said, "Come on back. You can stay at my house while you are here."

So I went back to Bethesda, MD and spent a week with Dick Halverson, asking him questions every night 'til he was bleary-eyed. There were two basic principles that Dr. Halverson taught me. The first one was simply that: lost people matter to God. We have misplaced the concept that people are lost without Jesus. We've been so blinded by pluralism and universalism and every other "-ism" that we've forgotten that Jesus Christ, according to God's word, is the only way to God. Do we believe this or not?

Growing churches are motivated to reach the "lost" because they still believe that people are lost without Jesus.

The second principle that he taught me is that the way to be effective in ministry is to follow the Ephesians 4:11-16 pattern; the pastor/teacher is given gifts to equip the laity to do the work of ministry and build up the body of Christ.

The early church practiced "the priesthood of all believers." Everyone was involved and interactive. They would meet together in small groups in homes, and they all shared and prayed and sang and let the spirit of God move!

The 313 A.D. Edict of Milan turned an army, the army of Jesus Christ, into an audience of spectators.

A thousand dark years passed (The Dark Ages), before two men by the names of Martin Luther and John Calvin began to recognize the problem, and reversed the reversal. Slowly, ever so slowly, they began to put the ministry back into the hands of the laity.

Don Moller, in his book, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, wrote, "We are witnessing a 'reinventing' of world Christianity"

Pastors of growing churches are committed to equipping the laity and carrying out the great commission. This changes us from an audience of spectators into an army of active participants.

Growing apostolic churches create:

(5) Community. Notice in verse 42 that the people devoted themselves to the Apostle's teachings and to fellowship. They fellowshiped together. In verse 44, they shared everything they had in common.

In Jude, verse 12, it says that the early believers met together

in what they called a “love feast.” This fellowship was a safe place where they could be themselves. It was more like the local pub than like most churches. It was a community that cared for each other—unconditionally—and reached out to the unchurched.

The small group movement has provided the environment for this important function. A small group creates a safe place to share openly, be transparent, and find forgiveness. This, unfortunately, is not typical of most people’s experiences in church.

There was a family character on the TV show *The Simpsons*. The Flanders family, who lived down the street from the Simpsons, and were “born-again” Christians.

A dialogue went something like this:

Homer Simpson said to Mrs. Flanders, “I notice you haven’t been around lately. Have you been away?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, “I’ve been away at Bible camp.”

“What do you do at Bible camp?”

“Well, we’re learning how to be more judgmental.”

And viewers watching say, “Amen!” because that is their image of what the church really is: a group of judgmental hypocrites. That was not the early church.

George Barna writes: “What makes a church secure and stable is not only friendliness, but true concern, compassion and caring for others. The real church is the people who are emotionally connected by their mutual and stated love for Christ and by their commitment to each other because of Christ.”

Elton Trueblood in *The Yoke of Christ*, says, “The early Christians were not people of standing, but they had a secret power among them, and the secret power resulted from the way in which they were members one of another.”

The early church was a “hospital for sinners.” It was a place where their spirits were lifted, problems were solved, hurts were healed, hearts were fed, and the spirit of God spoke to the people

I remember reading, when I was in college, *The Art of Loving* by Eric Fromm. In it he said, “Love is active concern for people.” That’s what the early church had—an active concern for each other, and for those that didn’t know Christ in the community.

Church historian Martin Marty says that one word defines the difference between churches that grow and those that do not: “Invite!” He reports a study indicating that the average Presbyterian “invites someone to church once every 24 years.”

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I gave that statistic in an address that I gave at a combined meeting of two Presbyteries a few years ago. Afterwards, an elder in one of the declining churches responded with, "I don't buy that number... 24 years. I've been a Presbyterian 40 years and I've *never* invited anyone to church!"

In stark contrast, George Hunter in *Church For the Unchurched* reveals a recent survey in an apostolic church. The Community Church of Joy revealed that "81% of the members of that church had invited at least one person to church in the past year." In fact, "18% had invited 7 or more persons in the last year." An incredible contrast! Little wonder that we Presbyterians have lost a million members in the last 30 years.

Apostolic churches seem to be intentional about inviting people to church, and developing relationships with unbelievers for the cause of Jesus Christ.

One pastor that concentrates on developing relationships with the unchurched is Pastor Tony Campollo.

There was once an occasion when Tony was in Honolulu for a speaking engagement. He had jet lag, it was two o'clock in the morning, and he couldn't sleep. He was starving. So he decided to find a place to get some food.

He walked around and eventually he found a diner. While he was sitting there eating his eggs, two prostitutes came in the door.

One of them said to the other one, "You know, tomorrow is my birthday."

And the other one said sarcastically: "Well, what do you want me to do, bake you a cake and have a party for you?"

"No," she said, "I don't expect that. I've never had a birthday party in my life. And I wouldn't even know what to do with it if I had one. I just wanted somebody to know."

Well, Tony heard that, and when she left, he leaned over and asked the cook, "Who was that?"

"That's Dolores," said the cook. "She comes in here at 2 a.m. every morning."

Tony said, "She said it's her birthday tomorrow, and she's never had a birthday party. Wouldn't it be fun to have a little surprise party for Dolores?"

The cook turned around and yelled, "Hey Alice, there's a guy out here who wants to have a birthday party for Dolores ... tomorrow ... it's her birthday!"

And his wife yelled from the kitchen, "Well, that'd be great."

I'll bake a cake!"

They set it up for the next day. They would have a surprise party for Dolores.

Tony went back to his hotel room and went to bed. He got up the next morning, spoke at his conference, and then he went out and began looking for decorations for the surprise birthday party for Dolores. By 2 o'clock the place was all decorated.

Well, somehow, word had gotten out, and the place was filled.

Soon Dolores walked in. Tony led this cross-section of humanity in a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday," to Dolores. Then they brought out a cake from the back.

She stared. She looked at the cake, and just stared at it.

The cook yelled from the back, "Hey, Dolores, are you going to blow out the candles or am I going to have to come out there and blow them out for you?"

She said, "That's all right. I'll blow them out. But would it be okay if I just took the cake home and looked at it for a few days?"

He said, "Oh, sure, that's fine. I've got some other cake back here for the folks."

Dolores said, "Excuse me. I need to go to my apartment. I'll be back in a few minutes." And she took the cake and went out the door.

The room suddenly went silent. Well, Tony being a pastor knew what to do. He led in prayer. He prayed for Dolores. And he prayed that somehow she would get out of the lifestyle she was in and walk closely with Jesus. He ended with, "In Jesus name, Amen." Then he looked up and a roomful of beady eyes were upon him.

And the cook said, "You didn't tell me you were no preacher! What kind of a preacher are you, anyway?"

Tony said, as only he could say in one of those brilliant moments when the Holy Spirit gives him the right words, he said, "I'm the kind of preacher who gives birthday parties for prostitutes at 2 o'clock in the morning."

The cook said, "I don't believe that. There is no church like that. If there was a church like that, I'd join it!"

Most people would, if they knew that it truly was a hospital for sinners!



*What Are My Deepest Pastoral Concerns for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church?*

One concern is that we are not concerned enough with church growth, and if I were speaking to my own denomination that would be my main concern. I doubt, however, that anyone in this group needs to guard against this. Another concern is that in the pursuit of Church Growth, it might become something we idolize or even worship.

All of us start out right. You see, my first love, as I'm sure yours was, was simply Jesus. But somewhere along that road, I lost that first love.

I was deeply convicted by the apostle John's words in Rev.2:2: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance . . . you have persisted and endured hardships for my name . . . and you have not grown weary . . . Yet, you have forsaken your first love."

Perhaps the most important lesson that I have learned is that I can know everything about church growth, the Bible, Jesus, His principles and teachings, but if I am not walking with Jesus, in His word on a daily basis, and demonstrating His unconditional love, I am but a clanging cymbal!

Don't get me wrong; I still have a passion for the lost, but my passion for church growth cannot take the place of a passion for Jesus in my life. There came a painful point in my life where I realized that I had been striving so hard to "make the church grow" that I had nearly forgotten my first love: Jesus.

In that time of painful introspection, I learned an important lesson that I share with you today, We, as pastors and theologians who gather around a common passion for lost souls, must be constantly reminded that our highest calling is not to strive for growth but to abide in Jesus and return to our "first love."

What kind of church does God want to grow? I believe The Lord would have us get back to his original idea. Growing apostolic churches both in the early church and today, are churches that:

*Convict People  
Connect With People  
Celebrate Joyfully in Worship  
Carry Out the Great Commission  
And Are Caring Communities*

Obviously, the message has never changed, but this messenger's prayer for all of us is that our FIRST love and our LAST

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love would not be church growth but JESUS.

Writer

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