

## The High Efficiency Church

Joseph Higginbotham

By now, most of us are familiar with the “Field of Dreams” theory of church growth—“If you build it, they will come.” Baptists know it as the “Bonsai Theory”<sup>1</sup>. This popular theory of church growth says that growing a church costs money—lots of it. It says that if you are willing and able to out-spend, out-program, out-staff and out-build First Super-Colossal Predatory Mega-Receptor Church across town, your church, too, can benefit from the “feeder-receptor phenomenon”<sup>2</sup>, growing large at the expense of smaller churches unable to keep up with the ecclesiastical Joneses. Field of Dreams/Bonsai Theory says that if you want to grow your church you must build before your present facility is outgrown, you must add staff before you actually need that Minister to Generation X, and you must add programs before anybody requests them. All this costs a great deal of money and gives rise to a few questions:

- (1) Though throwing money at growth obstacles is strategic, is it *efficient*?
- (2) When God ordained the church, did He intend it to be a money pit?
- (3) How did the early church grow so fast without a lot of money?
- (4) If most of a church’s growth comes at the expense of churches which can’t or won’t spend the money to “keep

up,” how does this “transfer growth” bring lost/unchurched people into the Kingdom?

Note I didn’t ask, “Does it work?” Of course it “works” in the sense that building bigger buildings, paving larger parking lots and hiring more staff attracts larger crowds. If it didn’t “work” churches wouldn’t do it. What I’m concerned with—what I think Scripture demands we be concerned with—is whether or not Jesus gets maximum “bang for His buck” when all our growth strategies involve spending huge sums of money. When a senior pastor goes before his board and says, “Our growth is stifled because we don’t have 60 acres in the suburbs” isn’t he like that “wicked, lazy slave” (Matthew 25:26) who, when confronted with his failure to increase his master’s wealth, blamed his *master*, calling him a “hard man” who tried to reap where he had not sown? If you read the text again, you’ll see that the unfruitful slave’s master *did* sow—a total of 8 talents among three slaves, to be exact—and he expected faithful and efficient use of those talents. The church board might buy it when pastors tell them the church won’t grow unless they purchase radio during morning drive time, but how will God respond when, one day, we are asked to give account of our stewardship and we tell Him He was a “hard man” who wouldn’t persuade the city building commissioner to rule favorably on our proposal to build a 10,000-seat auditorium? In other words, rather than blame God, or our penny-pinching members for the resources (“talents”) we don’t have, wouldn’t it be better—more godly and more *efficient*—to prayerfully, strategically and wisely employ the resources God has *already* sown?

Entrepreneurial businesses<sup>3</sup> and churches<sup>4</sup> alike are growing by throwing *creativity*, not money, at growth obstacles. Declining and plateaued churches—that’s 80% of them, folks<sup>5</sup>—don’t need more money. They need a more efficient way to do church, a more efficient utilization of the “talents” God has already sown. If the parable of the talents teaches us anything, it teaches us that God demands our efficient stewardship of the resources He has sown—however meager those resources may at first appear. What are those resources—those talents—He

has given us to steward or manage? Basically, they are *time*, *staff* and *facilities*. Intuitively, all church leaders seem to know which dimensions of growth require our management or stewardship and we mention them negatively or plaintively in the form of three “If only...” statements:

1. “If only we had better facilities;”
2. “If only we had more staff;” and
3. “If only I had more time.”

Each of these plaintive statements is a “My Master is a hard man, reaping where He doesn’t sow” statement. The focus is on what we *don’t* have. How might our ministries be transformed if, instead, we focused on what we *have*, what our Master *has* sown? What time, staff and facilities has God sown in your church?

*“If only I had more staff”*

Many pastors see themselves and their churches in a kind of “catch 22”—they need staff to grow the church, but they can’t hire the additional staff without first getting more people (more givers) to pay those staff salaries. Let me ask a question. Why should God give us more staff if we haven’t efficiently used the free, unpaid staff He has already given us? Perhaps you’re like the pastor I know whose church grew rapidly until the pastor was “maxed out,” that is, he was spread too thinly to make any more visits, teach any more classes or squeeze in any more counseling sessions. Working 60 hours weekly, the stressed-out pastor told his board the church couldn’t grow unless they hired more staff. Ironically, this man’s congregation was filled with talented, motivated people who had seen the pastor’s work load and had offered to help out. There was even ordained clergy in the church, but the pastor chose to “bury” those talents and, in effect, accuse God and his “visionless, faithless” church board of depriving him of the staff he needed. The bottom line was that this pastor wasn’t interested in more staff unless it meant spending money and placed his name above others on an organization chart. Bill Hybels says many churches are “crippled”<sup>6</sup> by such “insecure pastors”<sup>7</sup> who should be creating a “leadership culture

in which others can lead,” in which “everyone is contributing.”<sup>8</sup> If you’re one of these insecure, church-crippling pastors, why should God entrust you with a big thing (more paid staff) when you haven’t been faithful in a small thing (unpaid staff)?

*“If only I had better facilities”*

Sometime ago I heard of a company which was an underachiever on the stock market because it owned a great deal of undeveloped land and unused buildings and seemingly had no strategy for exploiting those resources to the benefit of the shareholders. Seizing upon the opportunity, another company mounted a hostile takeover bid and acquired the undervalued, underachieving company, sold its land assets and made a killing. What if I were to tell you that your church owns land, buildings, audio-visual equipment, food-service equipment and other assets and facilities it isn’t using? Can you see those assets? If you define your church the way the county courthouse or your bank does, you’ll never be able to see those unused assets, but if you define the church as all your people and the assets under their control, you’ll realize that your church has facilities *all over town*. In addition to the houses and apartments your people live in, your church owns TVs and VCRs which could be used to show Christian films, it owns food service equipment which could be used to show hospitality to the lost, and it owns spare bedrooms which could be used to shelter battered women, homeless men and runaway children. Your church owns cars, trucks and vans which could transport people to Bible studies, small group meetings and other meetings in those homes and apartments you own all over town. Through your members, your church has access to clubhouses, conference rooms and other facilities which could be used to start new chapters of various “marketplace ministries”, workplace prayer groups and even new churches. Are you exploiting the assets God has already sown? Why should He give you a big auditorium and a spacious parking lot if you aren’t using the many small living room “auditoriums” and driveway “parking lots” already at your disposal?

*"If only there were more time"*

When most pastors think of "time management," they think of their packed Day-timers or that new piece of software which promises to organize them into lean, mean ministry machines, but what would you say if I told you that, in addition to managing your own time, there's a sense in which pastors must efficiently steward their *members'* time? Because many pastors measure their ministry progress by how many and how often people pack the pews at church services, there is a tendency for some churches to keep their best people busy with meetings down at the church building. It's how many pastors keep score. Faces in the auditorium two or three times weekly means we're doing a good job, right? This leads to a question: if our people are sitting in a church service, when are they going to make those vital contacts with the lost? How many people can our members love to Christ if they spend all their time in church? I'm reminded of the old joke about the fellow who lost his watch on a dark street corner but searched for it under the street lamp at the next corner because the light was better. We say we want our churches to grow by finding lost people who need Christ, but we spend most of our time under the street lamp instead of in the dark where the lost people are.

I was once asked to meet with a group of church leaders whose church was dying. (Ever notice that dying churches don't get interested in attracting new members until they can no longer pay their bills?) They asked me to help them hatch a plan to turn it around. I asked them to tell me about their busiest, most faithful church member. Everyone agreed that it was "Wally."

"Tell me about Wally's week," I said.

"Well, he works about 50 hours a week—runs a small business—and he's at church every time the doors are open," they told me.

"In addition, he teaches a Sunday School class, sings in the choir and he's down here at the church every Saturday doing maintenance—you know, cutting the grass, painting, whatever."

"Okay, let's add it up," I said. "His Sundays and Wednesday evenings are shot because of church services, his Saturdays are

shot doing maintenance on the building, he attends choir practice one evening each week and, I assume, he spends at least one evening preparing a Sunday School lesson. When does he have time to invite a lost person to dinner, host a neighborhood Bible study, develop a friendship with a lost employee?" They agreed that Wally, as well as others in the church, was too busy with church-related stuff to be about kingdom-related stuff.

One of my favorite true stories is about a Baptist pastor I know who once accepted a call to a 50-member church which, in spite of explosive population growth around it, remained numerically stagnant. The surrounding community was growing so fast that he couldn't visit all the new families moving into town, so each week he met with his deacons and pleaded with them to help him make contacts. Each week they turned him down, each week he closed the door to his study, sprawled face-down on the floor and said, "Oh God, get me out of this dead church. I'm the only man here who wants it to grow."

God didn't grant that request. Instead, He taught him something about efficiency by asking people *not* to attend church. He went first to deacon Fred and said, "Fred, I want you to quit the choir and stop coming to Wednesday night prayer meeting."

Incredulous, Fred said, "Pastor, I've seen a lot of pastors come and go here, but you're the first one who ever asked me not to come to church."

"Fred," the pastor explained, "God doesn't need you in the *choir*—you sing off-key anyway—He needs you out in the neighborhood contacting the lost people He's sending to our town to work in the new auto factory. I want you to take Wednesdays and Thursdays off to spend as you please, but give me Tuesday nights and, together, we'll make some visits and invite some lost folks to church. Some of them will come, and some of them will meet Jesus. What do you say?"

Fred said "yes." Later, other men said "yes" to the same proposition. That church grew from 50 to 250. God didn't give them more time, He just taught them to become a "High-Efficiency Church," turning unproductive off-key choir time into face-time with the lost. This "solo" pastor and his newly-ordained

“staff” proved faithful in a little and God entrusted them with much. That’s the reward of becoming a High-Efficiency Church.

### *The Expense Excuse*

How many worthy, kingdom-building projects go begging because we use the expense excuse? How many lost people could we reach if money were no object?

Recently I was preaching for a small church without a pastor and I challenged them to plant a new church within the next calendar year. They were quick to remind me that their tiny budget barely allowed them to pay the mortgage and provide a modest salary for the pastor. Before preaching at their church, I had read about its history and knew that they had begun as a home Bible study just 25 years ago.

“Tell me,” I asked, “where did your church meet before you acquired this choice piece of land and built this nice building?” (Even churches with great property decline if they aren’t efficient).

“We met up there in brother Winters’ living room,” one charter member told me.

“How much did you have to pay for that living room?,” I asked.

“Well, nothing, of course; brother Winters wouldn’t charge us to meet in his living room!,” snorted another old-timer.

“Well,” I continued, “how much did you pay the preacher?”

“Nothing. He had a job down at the nickel plant and we didn’t have to pay him a dime.”

“Hmm, so your own church started 25 years ago with no budget, no building no paid staff, but you’re telling me that you can’t start another church just like that this year? Why not? If money wasn’t a barrier then, why is it now?”

Their only barrier to planting a new church or growing the one they had was their own thinking. For the price of a pot of coffee and, perhaps, a plate of chocolate chip cookies, they could have used their living rooms and family rooms as places to love their lost neighbors and friends to Christ, but they didn’t do so because they had accepted the idea that reaching folks has to

cost money.

### *The High Cost of Low-Efficiency*

If we ran our businesses and our households with the same inefficiency we tolerate—even encourage—in the church, we'd all be bankrupt. Suppose a business had 80 sales representatives which it incessantly taught and trained but never sent out in the field to make a sales call? I've just described the average church. Suppose a business owned real estate it never used to produce, display or distribute its product? Again, I've just described the average church. Our churches don't stagnate and decline because they have no money, no time, no staff, no facilities. They decline and stagnate because they are so poorly-managed, so inefficient in their use of resources God has sown.

When a lame man begged alms of Peter in Acts 3:6, he gave an answer which we cannot give: "Silver and gold have I none, but what I have I give to you." Most of our churches are rich in silver, gold, houses, land, talents and other resources that we are, for the most part, burying in the ground.

### *Becoming a High-Efficiency Church*

Unlike the "church growth models" which can be examined, taught, copied and duplicated, the High-Efficiency Church has little to do with form, structure and methodology. Becoming a High Efficiency Church has to do with thinking differently about the church. Instead of starting with "what we don't have", e.g., greater attendance, bigger buildings, more staff, the High-Efficiency Church starts with "what we have," that is, *what God has already sown*. Becoming a High-Efficiency Church starts with an *inventory*, not a wish list. Becoming a High-Efficiency Church starts with the presupposition that a sovereign God has equipped (or handicapped!) us with exactly what He wants us to have and that we cannot expect Him to give us more until we have been faithful and efficient with what He has *already sown*. What has He sown in your church? Senior pastor, why not grab your membership roll and, name by name, work through that list, praying as you go, "Lord, show me what you've sown in this per-

son. Show me how I, their pastor/equiper (Eph. 4:11-12), can help this person fully employ their spiritual gifts and fully deploy their material gifts for Your kingdom. Lord, Your word says I should know the condition of my flocks (Proverbs 27:23). Show me their condition.” That’s a high-efficiency prayer brought on by high-efficiency thinking. If the Lord brings nothing to mind about some of your members, perhaps He wants you to schedule a meeting. When you don’t know what gifts—spiritual and material—a member can contribute, why not ask? That’s high-efficiency.

#### *The Role of The Spirit in the High-Efficiency Church*

While some of the dynamics of church growth can be efficiently managed—staff, time, facilities—One can’t: The Holy Spirit. It’s because of the Spirit’s autonomy, sovereignty, sheer unpredictability and ceaseless creativity that becoming a High-Efficiency church has little to do with forms and structures. The Spirit often resists and seldom confines Himself to our structures. As one writer put it, “The river (life) makes its own riverbed (structure).”<sup>9</sup> Just as the mighty rivers often overflow their banks and even change course, The Spirit has plans for your church which may transcend any methodology or structures you create. Becoming a High-Efficiency Church doesn’t necessarily mean following or inventing a specific set of methods. In fact, we should be ready and willing to change at the Spirit’s prompting any time our current methods or structures get in His way or become inefficient.

High-Efficiency Churches can take many forms—cell churches, house churches, big churches, small churches—it’s not the size or the polity that matters, it’s the faithfulness to use *whatever He has sown*. The “wicked, lazy slave” in the parable of the talents wasn’t rebuked because he had only one talent, he was punished because he didn’t use it efficiently. Becoming a High-Efficiency Church means taking inventory of what God has sown and prayerfully exploiting it for God’s glory and service.

What has God sown that your church isn’t using?

## Writer

Higginbotham, Joseph. Address: Lexington, KY. Title: Writer, Church Consultant. Joseph Higginbotham attended Appalachian Bible College. His articles have appeared in *Leadership, Eternity, Searching Together, Church Administration, Living With Teenagers* and other Christian periodicals.

## NOTES

1. Ken Hemphill, *The Bonsai Theory of Church Growth*, (Broadman).
2. Carl George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Revell), 31.
3. Paul Hawken, *Growing A Business* (Simon and Schuster), 33-34.
4. Frank Tillapaugh, *Unleashing The Church* (Regal Books), 86-89.
5. Carl George, *How To Break Growth Barriers* (Baker), 184.
6. Lynn and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church* (Zondervan), 154.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Rudy Ray, "Authority and Ministry in the Local Church," *Searching Together*, (Spring 1984), 5.