



## **Measuring Church Numerical Growth is Not as Easy as it Seems by George Bullard**

A recent request for the names of growing churches caused me to think about how hard it is to measure church growth. One's first reaction might be that it is an easy task. If a church has more people in attendance this year than they did last year, they are growing. But with that standard in mind, consider the following list of congregations. Which of them are growing?

- Hillside Church's weekly attendance has grown by 17 percent over the past five years in a community where population has increased almost 30 percent during the same period. Most people in attendance come from neighborhoods within about a three-mile radius around the church facilities.
- Grace Church, in a section of the county that has grown significantly over the past generation, has started or partnered with a new congregation every three to four years. The total weekly attendance in these collective congregations is more than 3000. Grace has slightly fewer in attendance than they did a generation ago.
- First Church has decreased in weekly attendance by 35 percent in the past 20 years. Also, the size of the average household connected with the congregation has decreased from 3.4 people to 2.6 people. Twenty years ago the average Sunday attendance represented 147 households; now it represents 163 households.
- In Holy Trinity Church, the active leaders were present an average of 46 Sundays per year three decades ago. Today they are present an average of 39 Sundays. Weekly attendance is about the same as it was 30 years ago. However, if you count the number of different people present over a four-week period, that number is up 23 percent over the past 30 years.
- North Street Church's average attendance has slowly declined from an average of 263 to 149 over the past two decades. During the same time, they have served as the incubation site for seven new congregations of non-Anglo and/or non-English demographics who have moved on to other locations. It currently has two congregations permanently nesting in its facilities.
- Calvary Church's surrounding neighborhood has decreased in population by almost 20 percent over the past decade. Attendance at weekly worship is up by an average of five people during the same period. Less than half the people who attend weekly worship come from the neighborhood. Most leaders drive five or more miles to attend worship.
- Southside Church split thirty-five years ago following a nasty church-wide conflict, and New Jerusalem Church was formed. The split resulted more from cultural and socioeconomic differences than from issues of theology and governance. Today, Southside and New Jerusalem are each slightly smaller than the single church was three decades ago.



- St. Francis Church's weekly worship attendance had been around 250 for many years. A Thursday night contemporary worship service started by high school students and their sponsors now has a weekly worship attendance of more than 300 people. Very few of these are also present for worship on Sunday.

Which of these churches are growing? All of them. It simply depends on how you define church numerical growth. Is church growth defined by an increase in average attendance regardless of what is happening in the context around the church? Is it defined by the total contribution to the kingdom, and thus church plants represent growth for the sponsoring or partnership congregation? Is growth defined by individual people present or by the number of households in active participation?

Have church attendance patterns changed in the past twenty-five years to where average attendance now is defined by the number of different people present each month? In transitional urban communities, is growth defined as the ability to reach out to the diversity of people now present, even if it is through launching or nesting congregations of a different demographic?

How about defining growth compared to the expansion or shrinkage of the target population the congregation feels called to serve? If churches intentionally and unintentionally split, and both congregations prosper to a degree, is that church growth? If a new worshipping community or congregational expression of a different style is started by existing churches' members in the current church facilities, is that church growth?

Be careful. These various ways of looking at numerical growth are not intended to rationalize every church's situation. Not every congregation that appears to be growing numerically is actually growing in view of its situation. Hillside Church, for example, although it grew by 17 percent in five years, actually declined in relationship to its community, which increased 30 percent.

These examples do suggest the need for an expanded understanding of what represents real numerical growth. In each different situation, one must ask how best to measure numerical growth. Can it be defended as real growth? Or, is it simply a rationalizing of the church's situation?

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